

STUDY

Jakob Schwörer (ed.)
January 2025

New Danish Paradigms on Asylum and Integration

Effects and Challenges

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Foreword

Dear Readers,

The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Nordic Countries aims to strengthen the political dialogue between Germany and the Nordic countries, sharing fundamental values and addressing similar challenges in Northern Europe. This volume stems from many hours of discussions in our office and during several of our events as well as extensive investigations into the significant changes to Danish asylum and migration policies since 2000.

As a bridge between the Nordic countries and Germany, we've often been asked to inform interested parties about the successes and pitfalls of Danish migration and asylum policy, which we have done through lectures and policy papers. We are pleased to present the first comprehensive English-language exploration that draws lessons from the Danish experience, with a particular focus on the unique challenges faced by refugees, and especially refugee women, under the new regulations and how these policies affect social cohesion overall. We are privileged to have distinguished experts from Denmark, Sweden and Germany contributing to our questions, offering fresh insights for policymakers, civil society, and academics.

The authors conclude that the new paradigms in Danish asylum and migration policy have yielded few measurable successes while resulting in negative consequences for people migrating and society as a whole. Notably, Denmark negotiated an opt-out from the EU's common rules on asylum and migration when it joined the European Union and thus can maintain its own policies in this area and is

not bound by the EU asylum *acquis*. The combination of this opt-out and the findings presented in this anthology leads us to conclude that the approach is not a viable model for other European states aiming to manage migration in accordance with European laws and values.

In addition, our research has revealed that the Danish strategy has detrimental effects on neighbouring countries, highlighting the critical need for EU solidarity and a collaborative approach. Migration policies implemented at the expense of neighbouring states are not only counterproductive but also undermine the fundamental pillars of European cooperation: solidarity and human rights. It is evident that no European country can effectively address the complex challenges of migration management in isolation; a unified and cooperative approach across the continent is of utmost importance. This book aims to strengthen the perspectives in the ongoing debate by providing a holistic view of the effectiveness of current policies.

We hope that these lessons provide useful insight to other countries facing similar challenges, including the rise of far-right ideologies. Our goal is to promote informed discussions on migration and asylum policies across Europe and provide valuable insights for readers grappling with these complex issues.

I hope you find as many valuable insights and lessons in this volume as I have.

Kristina Birke Daniels

Director FES Nordic Countries

Introduction

Radical-right Mainstreaming on Immigration/Integration in Western Europe and Denmark

by Jakob Schwörer

In February 2019, the Social Democrats, Venstre, the Liberal Alliance, the Conservative People's Party, and the Danish People's Party all voted for legislative changes regarding integration and immigration law. The resulting law marked a significant shift away from integrating people seeking protection into society and the labour market and toward repatriation and restrictions. This became known as the Danish "paradigm shift".

The beginning of the Danish paradigm shift can be traced back to 2015 when Denmark introduced a new one-year temporary protection status for civilians against generalized violence, which granted very limited rights to refugees. In 2016, 33 per cent of all asylum seekers were granted protection under this precarious protection status (Bendixen 2024). However, it was not until 2019 that this temporary and precarious protection standard was fully implemented. The paradigm shift legislation of 2019 generalized the logic inherent in the temporary protection framework of 2015 to all types of refugee protection in Denmark. As a result, all refugees are granted a precarious protection status with little prospect of permanent residency. The restrictive asylum regime was accompanied by what is publicly known as "ghetto legislation", which targeted "non-Western" people in general, regardless of their refugee status. In short, it enabled the Danish authorities to expel and relocate people of "non-Western" origin from certain areas under certain conditions in order to avoid "parallel societies".

As this book will show, the Danish case is an extreme example of what is happening across West-

ern Europe: radical right discourses and legislation are becoming normalized — especially in asylum and integration policies. Throughout Western Europe, mainstream parties are confronted with the continuing success of populist radical right parties (PRRP). The latter are so-called "issue owners" when it comes to migration, i.e., they have a kind of brand recognition and are credited with the ability to solve the issue by the public. PRRP are primarily characterized by a nativist and authoritarian ideology. The nativist ideal of a culturally homogeneous nation-state is then threatened by the immigration of people with different cultures, religions, and ethnicities. In this worldview, the sphere of politics is reserved for the "native" in-group living in a culturally homogenous nation-state, and the state should not only be sovereign but uninfluenced by foreign powers or international organizations (Mudde 2007). The nativist ideology explains the PRRP's focus on immigration, multiculturalism, and Islam. Authoritarianism, on the other hand, is best described as a "punitive conventional moralism" that demands severe punishment for deviations from conventional (and nativist) norms (Mudde 2007). This is particularly associated with the politics of law and order — often, of course, against refugees and other cultural or ethnic groups.

Under pressure from PRRP's electoral successes, mainstream parties often panic and despair about how to react. This can lead to increased cooperation with PRRP and, most often, to the adoption of some of their positions and discourse. Systematic empirical evidence shows that the election platforms of centre-right and centre-

left parties have become much more sceptical of immigration and multiculturalism and even hostile to certain cultural and religious groups under pressure from PRRP (Abou-Chadi 2016; Akkerman 2015; Bale et al. 2010; Schumacher and van Kersbergen 2016; Schwörer 2021; Van Spanje 2010). I have termed the tendency to adopt the positions and discourses of PRRP the “nativist zeitgeist” (Schwörer 2021; Schwörer 2024) inspired by Mudde’s often-quoted “populist zeitgeist” thesis (Mudde 2004). The more salient the issue of migration/asylum and the more successful PRRP are, the more mainstream parties are willing to adapt to these discourses and positions, questioning the right to asylum and discursively discriminating against refugees and cultural groups as a whole. What is puzzling is that mainstream parties continue to adopt radical right positions, even though research has shown that they neither benefit electorally from such a strategy nor does the policy shift weaken the radical right.

In their 2023 study, Krause et al. examined 350 strategies adopted by mainstream parties in 108 electoral contexts from 1976 to 2017 in 13 Western European countries. Their research suggests that incorporating anti-multiculturalism stances into electoral platforms does not reduce support for radical right parties. Rather, these strategies are likely to drive voters toward radical right parties. In a similar vein, Spoon and Klüver (2020) analyzed the behaviour of voters in a number of countries, including Denmark, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. They found that mainstream parties do not gain an electoral advantage by adopting more critical views on immigration, nor do they stem the flow of votes to radical right competitors.

These observations are relevant for both conservative and social democratic parties. More specifically, Abou Chadi et al. (2021) (see also Häusermann et al. 2021) use survey data to examine voter transitions away from social democratic parties in Western Europe since the 2000s. Their analysis shows that only about 10 per cent of these voters switched their loyalties to populist radical right parties. The majority of defectors moved to green, left, and centrist parties.

The decision of mainstream parties to adopt radical right discourses is problematic from both strategic and normative perspectives. By endorsing and normalizing positions and narratives that target asylum seekers and certain cultural or religious minorities, these parties, along with the media, can shift the Overton window and potentially influence public opinion. The narratives of elites, a country’s legislation, and media coverage can fuel prejudice against immigrants in society, as found in several empirical studies (Carter and Lippard 2015; Messing and Ságvári 2021; Schemer 2012; Wirz et al. 2018). Schmidt-Catran and Czymara (2022), for example, show that elite discourse can explain the population’s hostility toward immigrants (as measured by statements on multiculturalism and national values in election platforms) to a significant extent, while actual levels of immigration have no effect on the population’s attitudes. When a country’s political elites have more positive attitudes towards immigration, host societies are also more open on average.

One of the most important aspects for democratic politicians to consider is that the effect of anti-immigrant discourses on public attitudes is greater when they are propagated by mainstream parties. Valentim et al. (2023) explicitly addressed the question of how xenophobic rhetoric by mainstream politicians influences the democratic norms of the population and how this compares to similar statements by radical right politicians. In two survey experiments, they found that xenophobic statements by mainstream politicians were more likely to erode democratic norms on the part of study participants than similar statements by radical right politicians. The data suggest that this is due to the fact that statements by radical right actors trigger a “positive” backlash from more liberal-minded people. Radical right parties are perceived as radical and untrustworthy by large parts of the population and are ostracized. When xenophobic statements are made by centrist politicians, however, they are perceived as more moderate and credible, even if their content does not differ significantly from that of the radical right. Mainstream parties often have better access to the media (though not necessarily to social media) and to a broader and

more diverse electorate, so their statements reach a larger swath of the population — with a corresponding effect. Thus, according to the latest research, the adoption of radical right and illiberal positions by democratic parties has a far more devastating effect on the social climate than the agitation of radical right parties themselves.

Nativist (or radical right) mainstreaming is taking place throughout Western Europe, albeit to very different degrees, and is not “only” a discursive shift but often an actual legislative one as well. In May 1993, in the face of increasing violence against asylum seekers and a growing number of asylum applications in Germany, the German Bundestag amended the German “constitution” (Basic Law) and passed new asylum regulations. This was passed with a large majority, with votes coming from the governing conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU)/Christian Social Union in Bavaria (CSU) and the liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP), as well as the opposition Social Democratic Party (SPD), with the purported aim of preventing “abuse” of the asylum system. Although refugees were the victims of right-wing extremist violence, centre-right politicians implicitly blamed them for the hostile public mood against them (Riese 2022). The new legislation neglected the right to asylum for anyone entering Germany from a so-called “safe country of origin”, which includes every single EU country. Since Germany is located in the middle of the EU, this was a very convenient solution. This law was passed years before the EU’s Dublin Convention came into force which follows a similar approach. Today, relatively few refugees in Germany receive protection under the provisions of the Basic Law, but this has had no significant effect on the number of asylum applications; instead, the Geneva Refugee Convention and EU law apply.

A more recent example of anti-immigrant hostility can be found in Sweden, long known as a beacon of liberal values toward refugees in Europe. The centre-right minority government in Sweden, consisting of the liberal-conservative Moderates, the Christian Democrats, and the Liberals, is totally dependent on the support of the radical right Sweden Democrats, with whom it even

drafted a joint government agreement. In 2023, they introduced a new minimum income requirement for non-EU citizens seeking residency, stipulating that those who earn less than 80 per cent of the country’s median income — a high threshold often agreed upon in collective bargaining agreements — and who are not permanent residents will no longer qualify for a residence permit. Estimates from the Swedish Migration Agency suggest that this will affect 10 to 20 per cent of work permit applicants, even those who have lived in the country for years and whose children have grown up in Sweden, disrupting entire livelihoods (Löfgren 2023; Migrationsverket 2023). Even Sweden’s Social Democrats have been surprisingly quiet when it comes to defending immigrants. Following Denmark’s lead, some Social Democratic politicians have started promoting a similar “ghetto approach”, while also stating that after the next election, they will only work with parties that back strict immigration policies (Aftonbladet 2024; Sverige Radio 2024).

However, the country at the forefront of restricting the rights of migrants (and even its own citizens with a migration background) is undoubtedly Denmark. Despite its severe attacks on human rights, conservative, liberal, and even social democratic politicians from elsewhere in Europe often look to Denmark’s approach to asylum and integration as a potential model for other countries to manage and reduce the number of asylum seekers. From the centre-right to the centre-left, Danish mainstream parties have adopted positions and discourses from the radical right and have agreed on illiberal integration and asylum policies in order to deter asylum seekers from Denmark. It was the Social Democrats who implemented the far-reaching legislation against asylum seekers and people with “non-Western” backgrounds after they entered government in 2019 (Schwörer and Birke Daniels 2024).

As a pioneering academic work, the edited volume by Rytter et al. (2023) deals with the consequences of the Danish paradigm shift for protection seekers. Unfortunately, the entire book is only available in Danish. As the public, academics, and policymakers outside Denmark have

shown great interest in the Danish case, I've decided — with the support of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Nordic Countries — to bring together scholars to publish an English-language anthology on the subject. In addition to addressing the consequences of the paradigm shift for refugees and “non-western” individuals, the contributions also cover the consequences on the actual numbers of asylum seekers and repatriations, as well as the implications for the party system, placing it in the broader context of nativist mainstreaming in Europe. Has the Danish model delivered what it promised in terms of controlling the number of asylum applications and repatriations? Has it weakened the radical right and strengthened mainstream parties, as is often assumed?

Contributions in this Volume

In the second chapter, Stinne Østergaard Poulsen discusses the legal aspects and consequences of Denmark's new approach to immigration and integration for asylum seekers. Although a new and particularly precarious protection status was introduced in 2015, it only became the norm for all refugees after 2019. As of 2019, refugees receive protection for one or a maximum of two years, which must be then renewed regularly. The protection status can be rejected in the follow-up application if the Danish authorities observe improvements in the refugee's home country — but it can also be withdrawn while it is still valid. As a result, refugees never feel safe and live with a permanent fear for their existence. Efforts made by refugees to integrate are not taken into consideration, and refugees cannot increase their chances of receiving protection or permanent residency in the first eight years. Permanent residence is only possible after eight years; in practice, it takes much longer due to criteria that are difficult to meet for refugees living in permanent insecurity. Stinne Østergaard Poulsen also provides insights from interviews with caseworkers, who often experience a sense of resignation. They are tasked with integrating refugees, but at the same time, they are forced (by law!) to promote the idea of leaving Denmark. Thus, the message they have to send is: “Please leave, we don't want you! But integrate!”

In the third chapter, Anika Liversage builds on her chapter in Rytter et al. (2023). She focuses specifically on the consequences of the paradigm shift for female refugees from Syria. While Denmark usually scores well in terms of gender equality and women's rights, this is not the case for marriage migrants and refugee women. The new legislation has a disproportionate effect on women. This is especially clear when women decide to divorce their husbands, as divorce often impacts their residence status. Divorce can be stigmatized in Syria, and if a Syrian woman divorces her husband and is subsequently returned, she may face discrimination and violence from relatives and her family. Danish legislation thus unintentionally incentivizes marriage migrants and refugee women to tolerate domestic violence. Anika Liversage shares insights from qualitative interviews with refugee women that reveal the endless despair that many women seeking protection in Denmark experience due to the precarious protection status offered by the Danish state.

The fourth chapter, by Rebecka Söderberg, focuses on the consequences for what the Danish state calls “non-western” individuals in Denmark. Integration and urban policy have become strongly intertwined in Denmark. Bill L38, publicly known as the “ghetto legislation” of 2018, is an amendment to the Public Housing Act and is part of Denmark's “integration” strategy towards people from “non-western” backgrounds. While the paradigm shift overall focuses on removing migrants from the national territory, the “ghetto legislation” (since 2021 called the “parallel society” legislation) focuses on regulating the mobility of racialized groups within the nation. These two dimensions are strongly connected, as the ghetto policy of 2018 presents problems such as crime and poverty at the local level as reasons for maintaining or tightening restrictive migration policies. The “ghetto legislation” allows for the eviction and relocation of “non-Western” individuals under specific conditions if their presence is deemed too concentrated in a particular area. Rebecka Söderberg shares findings from her study on the experiences of residents in Mjølnerparken, a neighbourhood that has recently been partially sold due to this legislation. Her analysis

shows how policies aimed at increasing security, mixing neighbourhoods, and integrating “non-Western immigrants” lead, at least during the transformation phase, to insecurity, spatial segregation, and exclusion from democracy and community at both local and national levels. In the case of Mjølnerparken, it is particularly striking that local community work initiated a process of restructuring in 2008 that improved safety, prevented crime, and increased the level of education, employment, and participation in leisure activities among residents. The ghetto legislation disrupted this successful process of social and physical transformation.

Martin Bak Jørgensen describes in the fifth chapter how the numbers of asylum seekers and repatriations developed after the Danish paradigm shift. In 2021, Mette Frederiksen, leader of the Social Democratic Party and Prime Minister of Denmark since 2019, declared her intention to “reduce asylum applications to zero” in Denmark (The Local 2021). The Danish government under the Social Democrats has promoted their strategy as an effective way to reduce immigration. According to their logic, making life more difficult for refugees in Denmark discourages future refugees from coming to Denmark. However, it is difficult to make a causal statement; the numbers do not suggest a significant change compared to the time before the paradigm shift — at least in a broader comparative perspective. The number of first-time asylum seekers in Denmark follows the same general trend as in the Nordic countries (and elsewhere in Europe), and the same can be observed for the number of repatriations. In a broader context, Martin Bak Jørgensen shows that this is hardly surprising, as migration research has repeatedly shown that deterrence measures against asylum seekers do not have a significant effect on refugees’ choice of destination countries. States have very limited power to make themselves unattractive to protection-seekers, as the most important factor in refugees’ choice of destination is social networks. That said, the Danish authorities do regularly withdraw the protection status of refugees. However, this does not lead to more repatriations but to the disappearance of refugees.

In most cases, the Danish authorities *do not* know the whereabouts of people whose residence permits have been revoked. Deportability, but not deportation per se, has become a constitutive element of the Danish immigration framework.

Susi Meret focuses on developments in the Danish party system in recent decades. Since the turn of the century, the centre-right mainstream parties have increasingly cooperated with the radical right *Dansk Folkeparti* (Danish People’s Party, DF), which has supported the minority government of the Liberals and Conservatives. As a result, the mainstream parties have moved sharply to the right — as has legislation. The most restrictive turn on integration and immigration policy coincides with the Social Democrats’ shift towards the right on immigration during the 2015 elections and again, more dramatically, in 2019. However, the radical right turn of the mainstream parties, including the Social Democrats, has not produced the desired results. The decline of the radical right DF, spurred by internal conflicts and a slight shift of voters towards the Social Democrats (and other mainstream parties), was not a direct consequence of the nativist turn of social democracy in Denmark. Rather, it was the social democrats’ left turn on social and economic issues that attracted a moderate number of former DF voters. The adoption of restrictive positions on immigration, to the point of pure nativist discourse against people of other origins, has also caused considerable dissent within the party. Today, the radical right in Denmark is almost as strong as the DF was in its heyday and consists of three radical right parties competing for the nativist vote: the DF, which still attracts about 5 per cent of the vote; the New Right, a neoliberal anti-immigration party currently rebuilding itself after a major internal crisis and polling at about 2 per cent; and the new Denmark Democrats, which attracts about 10 per cent of the vote. The Social Democrats, on the other hand, have been in free fall in the polls since 2022 and received their worst results ever in the 2024 European elections.

In the concluding chapter, I address the “so what” question by examining the broader implications of

the Danish case study. Despite implementing some of the most draconian immigration and asylum policies in Europe, Denmark does not stand out in terms of the number of asylum applications compared to other Nordic countries or in terms of repatriations. Moreover, mainstream political parties have not gained electoral benefits from their shift towards far-right stances on migration. The radical right remains as influential as before, albeit more diversified, now appealing to both economically left-leaning and right-wing nativist voters. The Danish example clearly shows what strategies *not* to adopt in competing with the radical right. Moreover, I suggest positive alternative strategies that mainstream parties can pursue instead, though with no guarantee of success.

The contributions in this volume show that the consequences of the paradigm shift for refugees and people with “non-western” origin are severe, far-reaching, and in tension with human rights. While the paradigm shift has only a symbolic effect on the actual numbers of asylum seekers and returns, it has a concrete and devastating impact on refugees who live in constant fear and despair that their protection status will be neglected. It further stigmatizes people with “non-western” backgrounds, who are considered a security risk by the Danish legislation simply due to their origin (even if they are Danish citizens!). As predicted by empirical studies, the adoption of nativist positions and legislation did not benefit the moderate centrist parties, nor did it contribute to the decline of the radical right in the country. Measured by its own standards, the Danish strategy has failed by almost all indicators and has instead poisoned the political discourse and functioned to exclude protection-seekers and people of a certain origin from the majority society.

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A Cycle of Insecurity

The Consequences of the Temporary Protection for Refugees in Danish Refugee and Integration Law

by Stinne Østergaard Poulsen

This chapter introduces legislative and procedural elements of the “paradigm shift” towards temporality in Danish refugee and integration law from a human rights perspective. It presents the main legal aspects of the paradigm shift, including the results from an analysis of updated case law from the Danish Refugees Appeals Board. Furthermore, this chapter provides a qualitative research-based introduction to the consequences of implementing such laws, procedures, and decisions from two perspectives. First, it outlines the impact on the everyday life of refugees, including on their education, employment, future ambitions, mental health, and dreams of belonging. Second, it presents the impacts on integration processes from the perspective of social workers working with newly arrived refugees. In sum, this chapter addresses the effects of the paradigm shift towards temporary protection and return, highlighting the precarity imposed on refugees and the challenges, setbacks, and dilemmas that the looming fear of deportation creates in integration processes.

It should be noted that temporary protection for refugees is not new, nor is it uniquely Danish. In the UN Refugee Convention of 1951, Article 1C (5) notes that if the reasons for being in need of protection cease to exist, international protection is no longer needed, and accordingly, cessation procedures can be initiated. However, the UN Refugee Convention also highlights that refugees residing in a state should be gradually given the same rights as the rest of the population in order to ensure

that protection does not only mean the protection against being deported to persecution, punishment or war, but that protection of refugees also should include providing the possibilities and fundamental rights in the country of protection in ways that enable refugees to build a new life in safety (Tan 2021).

Therefore, according to the UNHCR guidelines to the UN Refugee Convention, the temporality of international protection must be administered in such a way that temporary protection is not reassessed too frequently:

“A refugee’s status should not in principle be subject to frequent review to the detriment of his sense of security, which international protection is intended to provide.”

– UNHCR 2019, Paragraph 135

I will examine how the legislation and procedural elements introduced with the Danish paradigm shift undermine the “sense of security” for individual refugees specifically and society more generally, all while making integration more difficult to achieve.

I focus on three types of precarity of the new temporary protection: the legal precarity of the residence permit; the everyday precarity of refugee lives; and the welfare precarity, financial and symbolic, introduced with the shift away from

integration and towards a focus on return. The legal analysis is based on 255 decisions regarding the withdrawal of refugee protection from the Refugees Appeals Board in the period from January 1, 2021, to September 1, 2023. The qualitative analyses of the impact on the everyday life of refugees and on welfare integration processes are based on singular and group interviews with 33 young refugees and singular and focus-group interviews with 21 social workers.¹

Legal Precarity: A New Type of Temporary Protection

Beginning with a brief overview of the Danish context, the crafting of the new protection status, and the generalised temporality in Danish refugee protection, this section introduces the paradigm shift's legal framework and the legislation regulating the new type of temporary protection. To illustrate the implementation and impacts of these changes, it also includes some results from an analysis of updated case law from The Refugees Appeals Board, as well as an overview of the articulated criticism and concerns from UN agencies, NGOs, and academic experts regarding the legislation and decisions of withdrawal of protection. The paradigm shift was implemented in two phases.

Phase 1: A New Type of Temporary Protection

Prior to 2015, the Danish Aliens Act included two types of international protection: Section 7.1, which reflects the protection from Article 1A of the UN Refugee Convention (persecution on the grounds of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership of a particular social group), and the subsidiary protection in Section 7.2 reflecting the European Human Rights Convention Articles 2 and 3 which address the right to life and the prohibition of torture and inhuman or degrading treatment.

In practice, this means that the two types of international protection are administered by asking the question: For which reason are you persecuted? If the persecution is due to “race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion” (UN Refugee Convention, Article 1A) a refugee will be granted protection under Section 7.1. However, if a refugee is at risk of torture or inhuman or degrading treatment due to other reasons, status under Section 7.2 will be granted.

In 2011, the European Court of Human Rights' decision on *Sufi and Elmi v UK* opened a window of protection for civilian populations against generalised violence for the first time. Due to the absolute nature of Article 2 and 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights, the Court found that in extreme cases—such as in Mogadishu during the clashes between AMISOM troops and Al-Shabaab militias—there can be such a high level of generalised and thus arbitrary violence that anyone present in the area is at risk of a violation of Articles 2 and 3. The Court applied a number of criteria to assess the level of generalised violence, including the number of civilians killed and injured. With the judgment in *Sufi and Elmi v UK*, the European Court of Human Rights thus realised an interpretation of Article 3 that had previously only been theoretical: The existence of an extreme level of generalised violence also entails an obligation for states to provide a generalised protection against deportation thereto. This opened the doors to generalised protection. Specifically, this meant that all asylum seekers from central and southern Somalia were to be granted protection.

The narrow scope of this protection window has been continually demonstrated by the Court. Just two years later in *K.A.B. v Sweden*, the European Court of Human Rights found that, although the human rights and security situation in Mogadishu remained “serious, fragile, and in many ways unpredictable” (91), the intensity of the generalised violence was no longer at a level

¹ The data was collected in connection with the following studies: “Ung i usikkerhed. Betydningen af midlertidigt ophold for børn og unge med flugtbaggrund i Danmark” (Krøyer et al 2024); “Tilbagevenden til Syrien: Flygtningenævnets forsigtighedsprincip i Syrien-sager i lyset af M.D. v others” (Poulsen 2022); and “I’m on your team! When deportability becomes a lonely condition in welfare state relations” (Poulsen 2021).

Number of Refugees per Protection Status in 2016 and 2023

Table 1

	2016	2023
7.1	4,478 (60.9%)	1,306 (91.1%)
7.2	406 (5.6 %)	22 (1.6%)
7.3	2,475 (33.6 %)	106 (7.3%)

Source: Danish Immigration Service (2023).

that posed a generalised risk of violation of Article 3 for the civilian population. Since then, the Court has repeated this approach regarding the security situation in countries such as Iraq, Afghanistan, and Somalia², rejecting the generalised risk of violation of Article 3 for the entire civilian population despite there being a very serious security situation. The protection window against generalised violence is thus only opened “in the most extreme cases” according to the Courts’ practice. Moreover, it closes long before the UN Refugee Convention’s cessation standards of “fundamental and lasting” changes. As the *K.A.B. v Sweden* decision demonstrates, the window can close as soon as the security situation is no longer extreme, even if it remains serious, fragile, and unpredictable.

Against the backdrop of the refugee influx in Europe in 2015, catalysed by the civil war in Syria, the Danish government incorporated the narrow protection window logic into Danish asylum law by introducing a new type of refugee status: Section 7.3.

Civilians can be eligible for a temporary residence status permit under Section 7.3 for one year. This new status is linked to fewer rights and more restrictions. Recipients of this status are not able to seek family reunification for three years, no initial access to higher education, and most importantly: integration efforts in Denmark, i.e., employ-

ment, education, or engagement in civil society, are no longer given weight in the assessment of a renewal of the residence permit.

By implementing restricted rights for refugees, the government hoped to obtain what Gammeltoft and Tan (2017) coined “indirect deterrence”: migration control by making Denmark a less preferred destination for persons seeking protection. The new protection status aimed at protecting as few as possible for the shortest period possible, emphasising that the stay in Denmark would be short term, and that refugees should not expect to find or build a more sustainable future in terms of establishing family life, enrolling in education, or integrating into the Danish society.

The new, more insecure temporary refugee protection was primarily granted to women, children, and elderly persons from Syria; military service aged men were granted UN convention status due to the risks for draft evaders and dissidents (see also the chapter by Anika Liversage in this volume). Table 1 shows the number of refugees by protection status for the years 2016 and 2023.

The decrease in the number of persons receiving Section 7.3 protection between 2016 and 2023 reflects the changes made in the Danish authorities’ assessment of the level of risk of generalised violence for civilians in Syria. The relative increase in the percentage receiving Section 7.1 protection re-

² *S.H.H. v UK* regarding the security situation in Afghanistan, *J.K. and others v Sweden* regarding Iraq, and *R.H. v Sweden* regarding Somalia.

flects a change in the nationality (and thereby the nature of the conflict) of the refugees applying for asylum in Denmark. In 2023, most refugees receiving Section 7.1 protection were from Afghanistan, Eritrea, and Syria (adult “fighting age” men).

In the 2021 *M.A. v Denmark* decision, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that the postponed right to family reunification for refugees was a breach of Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights, the right to family life. The decision forced the Danish government to change the law so that the waiting period was reduced to one year. The legality of the legislation regarding the withdrawal of protection status regardless of integration efforts for at least eight years has not yet been assessed by the European Court of Human Rights.

Phase 2: Generalising Short-term Protection

In 2019, the Danish government passed legislation extending the logic of the subsidiary protection under Section 7.3 to all types of refugee protection in Denmark.³ This law is regarded as the full implementation of the legislative framework of the paradigm shift. Refugees residing in Denmark based on UN convention status (Section 7.1) still have the rights of the convention (e.g. a much higher threshold for cessation); however, the short validity of the residence permit, the declared temporality of the refugee protection, and the lack of possibility of securing permanent residence through integration efforts now apply to all refugees granted protection in Denmark. Accordingly, while the 2015 legislation introduced insecurity and restricted rights for a part of the refugee population (civilians fleeing generalised violence), the 2019 legislation imposed more insecurity, more frequent risk assessments, and intensified focus on deportation and repatriation (although in practice, deportations are rather rare, as shown in the chapter by Martin Bak Jørgensen) instead of integration for the whole refugee population.

Current Law

Refugee protection under Danish law is now characterised by short-term and temporary residence permits, frequent reassessments, a lack of consideration for societal integration, and the constant possibility of revocation.

Legal Features of Refugee Protection: Short-term, Temporary, and Uncertain Status

The *short-term status* is granted for one or two years at a time and can only be extended for additional successive periods of one or two years. This will continue until the refugee can fulfil the criteria for applying for permanent residence—this is after eight years at the earliest, but for most refugees much later. That the legal residence is *temporary*, means that asylum is explicitly granted for the purpose of a limited period of stay in Denmark. The legislation stipulates that the protection granted must be withdrawn as soon as the risk of persecution has ceased or decreased.

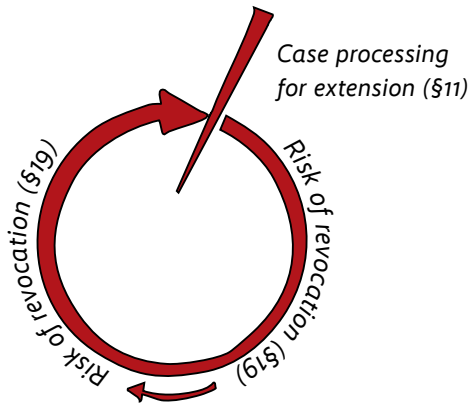
The immigration authorities perform *frequent and intensive reassessments*; these take place at a minimum at each application for renewal, meaning every year or every second year. Authorities are assessing whether the security and human rights situation in the country of origin has changed in a way that, in their view, would make international protection unnecessary to uphold. A reassessment of the need of protection can be evoked at any time during the validity of the residence permit.

Moreover, *integration efforts and personal ties are ignored*. The legislation stipulates that integration measures (employment, education, engagement in civil society, and ties to Danish residents and citizens) must be given the least possible weight when the need for protection is reassessed. The legislative comments outline that adult refugees must have resided in Denmark legally for eight to 15 years and be able to demonstrate considerable attachment to the

³ The original text of the law with the specific legislative changes can be found at: <https://www.retsinformation.dk/eli/lta/2019/174>.

Double Insecurity: Extension and Revocation

Fig. 1



Source: Krøyer et al. 2024.

Danish society through, for example, a long-term employment. This means that refugees cannot enhance their chances of securing legal residence and permanent protection by seeking employment, education, or engaging in civil society during their first eight years in the country. For children, according to current case law, sufficient ties to Denmark can be established after five-and-a-half to seven years of residence in Denmark, starting from the age of six. Time spent in Denmark prior to enrolling in school is not included in the assessment of whether children have a strong, personal connection to Denmark.

Refugee protection can be revoked or withdrawn primarily in two different ways⁴: if it is not prolonged at the expiration of the valid period (Section 11) or if it is revoked during the valid period (Section 19). Before the valid refugee status expires, the immigration authorities will carry out an assessment of whether international protection is still needed in order to determine whether the legal residency should be prolonged or deter-

mined. Furthermore, at any time during the valid period of legal residency, the immigration authorities can initiate cessation procedures and withdraw the right to stay in Denmark, if it is assessed that the need for protection has ceased to exist.

Accordingly, the temporary nature of refugee protection in Denmark is bifold. The granted legal residence is short term, valid for one to two years, and will be reassessed every year or every second year. Moreover, protection can be revoked at any time during the valid period. In effect, the holder of refugee protection can never rely on the future validity or stability of the protection granted.

Exiting Limbo: Limited Access to Permanent Residence

To apply for permanent residence, refugees must typically have legally resided in Denmark for eight or more years.⁵ Furthermore, a number of supplementary criteria must be fulfilled, including demonstrating language skills and having full employment. In particular, the criterion of full employment makes it difficult for many refugees to apply for permanent residence after eight years, especially those who are the most vulnerable as well as everyone enrolled in education.

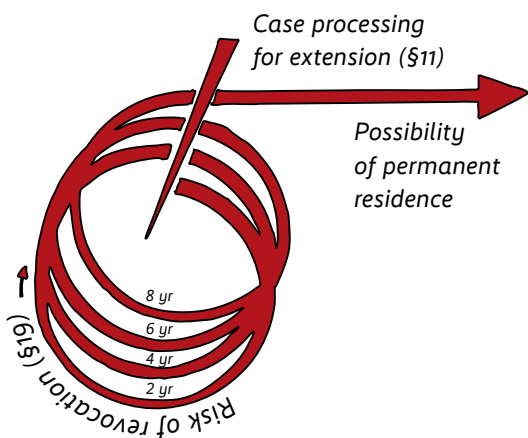
The criterion for full employment states that the applicant must have had full employment for the last three years and six months. Education, including paid internships during vocational training, does not fulfil this criterion. Moreover, school-aged refugees must first complete their education and then work for three and a half years before being eligible. In effect, many refugees, especially young adults, are excluded from accessing permanent residence for a period considerably longer than eight years. For the most vulnerable refugees, such as persons suffering from trauma or those with learning difficulties, the requirement to find and participate in full-

⁴ Other, less common, reasons include expulsion due to criminality, or cessation of validity due to travel to the country of origin, or fraud.

⁵ A fast-track to permanent residence exists, making it possible to apply after four years of legal stay. The criteria for applying through the fast-track procedure includes: full-time employment for four years; a high annual income; and Danish skills equivalent to ninth grade in oral, reading, and writing. As a result, it is almost impossible for refugees to access this track in four years.

The Cycle of Insecurity

Fig. 2



Source: Krøyer et al. 2024.

time employment and to pass language tests can effectively exclude them permanently from access to permanent residence.

As a result of the high barrier to entry for a more stable status, many refugees will live in legal precarity with a temporary residence permit for a period of time far exceeding eight years.

Legal Precarity: Introducing Deportability in Refugee Protection

This section examines the described legislative changes as potential contributors to legal precarity, assessing whether the formally granted protection provides refugees with genuine security from deportation to places of persecution or generalised violence.

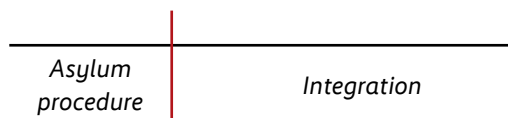
What distinguishes asylum seekers from refugees, and thereby separates asylum procedures from integration procedures, is the legal residency. They are usually in possession of a document that gives them protection and the right to stay legally in the country, and thus the certainty that they will be protected from persecution in their country of origin.

The asylum procedure—the period before legal residency and protection is granted—is characterised by fundamental conditions of uncertainty, temporality, and a lack of self-determination over one’s own life situation and future ambitions. Social relationships and educational activities are affected. It can be hard to concentrate on learning Danish in the presence of a constant fear of deportation (Vitus 2011). It is well-documented that the uncertainty and temporality of the asylum procedure is harmful to the mental health of asylum seekers (Gleeson et al. 2020, Hvidtfeldt 2018, Boettcher and Neuner 2022). The mental load of waiting—living in uncertainty and powerlessly awaiting the decision of the immigration authorities—has a widespread negative effect of life in asylum centres with serious negative consequences for health and the ability to uphold caregiver responsibilities (Dansk Flygtningehjælp 2018).

Prior to the paradigm shift, obtaining asylum and legal residence meant a fundamental change in life status for the refugee. This allowed them to leave the asylum centre and move “into” Danish society. The refugee protection constituted a lasting protection against deportation, and uncertainty was replaced by the possibility of building a future in Denmark.

In short, obtaining refugee protection meant a more or less definitive closure of the asylum procedure. The granting of asylum shut the door firmly, leaving uncertainty and legal precariousness behind.

Prior to 2015/2019

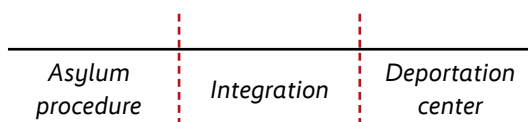


However, the paradigm shift seems to have opened this door in such a way that the legally residing refugee with valid status continues

to experience precarity in a way that parallels the uncertainty experienced during the asylum-seeking stage. With the short validity of the residence permit, the dual risk of withdrawal at each renewal but also spontaneously, and the lack of being able to secure residence through integration efforts, refugees' lives are mired in uncertainty. This means refugees are constantly awaiting the next wave of reassessments and lack the autonomy to change or secure their life situation.

In effect, the paradigm shift entails that the granted protection—the valid legal residence—no longer functions as a firmly closed door that protects refugees from persecution and enables them to focus on integration and building a future in Denmark. Instead, protection becomes fragile and unreliable, and paradoxically, being granted protection now includes the constant risk of being deported.

After 2015/2019



The irregular living conditions and fundamental uncertainty normally experienced by asylum seekers and other migrants appear to have been implemented in the structure of formal refugee protection. The uncertainty, the “load of waiting” (for the next cycle of reassessments), and the fundamental precarity of not knowing when or if the right to stay will be revoked are now inherent in the valid protection status.

The paradigm shift has opened a “window of cessation” (Tan 2021, p. 83), a prolonged period of uncertainty that closes at the earliest of eight years. The living conditions summarised by the concept of “deportability” (De Genova 2002) now apply to refugees. The deportability of the asylum seeker has, through the introduction of the paradigm shift, been extended to the depor-

tability of the refugee, creating precarious living conditions and destabilising the “sense of security” within the refugee protection.

When Can Protection Be Withdrawn? Overview and Tendencies in Case Law from the Refugees Appeals Board

The exact numbers of how many cessation decisions have been made are not available due to administrative factors with the immigration authorities. That said, more than 1,000 refugees from Somalia have lost their protection status in Denmark since 2016. Another 1,000 refugees from Syria have undergone cessation procedures, in which more than 100 refugees have had their protection status withdrawn or not prolonged (Filskov et al. 2022).

Based on an analysis of case law from January 1, 2021, to September 1, 2023, a total of 255 decisions, the following trends can be observed in how the paradigm shift legislation is being implemented.

During this period, most cases ended up with protection status renewed due to (children’s) strong ties to Denmark or with the granting of UN refugee status due to new types of risk of persecution. This means that a great number of refugees have had their protection status subjected to cessation procedures but a very limited number ended up losing their refugee status (but experienced months and years of uncertainty while waiting for the decision). More than 70 per cent of the cases assessed for cessation by the Refugees Appeals Board were granted refugee protection anew.

Furthermore, very few refugees who have had their protection status revoked have actually been returned or deported to Syria or Somalia. In part, this is due to the fact that Denmark has no diplomatic ties and, accordingly, no diplomatic return agreement with the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria and no general diplomatic deportation agreement with the Somalian government (see the chapter by Martin Bak Jørgensen in this volume). Accordingly, protection status is being withdrawn without the diplomatic procedures in place to actually return rejected refugees to their country of origin.

Refugees who have had their refugee status revoked live in deportation camps or flee to other European countries in the hope that such secondary movement will enable them to find more durable protection (and often, their whereabouts are simply unknown). However, many who flee elsewhere in the EU are returned to Denmark based on the EU Dublin Regulation. A considerable number of the refugees who have their protection status revoked in Denmark have subsequently been granted UN refugee status after their case was reopened due to updated risk assessments or political activities in Denmark (Danish Immigration Service 2023).

Moveable Zones of Safety

In the following, two examples from the analysis of the case law are presented, one concerning Damascus in Syria and the other the Lower Shabelle in Somalia. These illustrate the precarity of the new type of refugee protection (Section 7.3). In the Refugee Appeals Board's assessment of background information, the general security situation in Somalia and the Damascus area in Syria is regarded as severe, fragile, and unpredictable. However, it is not classified as "extreme"; as a result, the protection status of civilian refugees from these areas is now being revoked by the Danish authorities.

Section 7.3, Damascus, and a Change in Risks: From Generalized Violence to Imputed Political Opinion

According to available background information, armed clashes, including generalised or arbitrary violence, have markedly decreased in Damascus, Syria. This indicates that the Assad regime has won the battles and now controls the area. For many Syrian refugees, this means that the war is over but also that the persecutor has won. Therefore, they no longer fear generalised violence but instead individualised persecution. In most revocation cases concerning Syria, refugees argue, in line with most background information, that the current Syrian regime will see them as critics, traitors, or potential opposition members simply because of their flight to Europe. The Refugee

Appeals Board, however, maintains that merely returning from exile does not in itself pose a sufficient risk of serious abuse, and, therefore, protection can cease, just as being a family member of a military deserter is also not considered to pose a sufficiently serious risk (Poulsen 2022).

Given this approach, civilian Syrian refugees from other parts of Syria with valid protection status in Denmark can worry about when their hometown or region will be deemed safe enough for their residence permits to be revoked. The new temporary protection status follows a very narrow safety margin in the development of armed clashes and frontlines, meaning that as the map of safe and unsafe zones shifts in accordance with the dynamics of the conflict, the individual refugee's home region may tomorrow be deemed sufficiently safe to consider revoking residence permits. The narrow safety margin in the case law of the Refugee Appeals Board risks leaving the whole refugee population with worrying questions: When will a new report be released that leads the Refugee Appeals Board to assess the next region as safe?

Internal Flight Alternatives

The conflicts causing people to flee are often long-lasting and are rarely static. Frontlines can move, power dynamics can change, and intelligence agencies can alter tactics. When these changeable dynamics of conflict and persecution are combined with the frequent reassessments of temporary protection, a new legal precarity is formed, as demonstrated by the following example.

A decision from 2021 concerns a young man from Somalia who originally received asylum due to the general level of violence in the conflict between the militia al-Shabaab and African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) troops. He also has an individual conflict with Al-Shabaab, as Al-Shabaab forcibly recruited him as a young boy in the Lower Shabelle region of Somalia. He resisted and was detained and abused for three days before he managed to escape. In the cessation procedure, the Refugee Appeals Board continued to accept his account of the conflict and acknowledged that he

had an “asylum-justified conflict with al-Shabaab in his hometown.” However, the Refugee Appeals Board also assessed, in light of al-Shabaab’s current position and approach in Lower Shabelle, that he could take residence in other parts of the region, referring him to an “internal flight alternative.”

This illustrates how an individual refugee can never be sure if the authorities will change their assessment of a given persecutor’s reach and dominance. Conflicts are typically characterised by moveable zones of relative safety, and depending on the timing of the review in relation to the movement of such safe zones, the residence permit may be revoked or not. Will the case be reviewed at a time when Al-Shabaab has lost or regained control of towns in Lower Shabelle?

Danish Legislation in the Light of International Convention

The different legislative elements of the paradigm shift have faced international critique. This section presents some of the key points of critique and concerns articulated by UNHCR, NGOs, and academic researchers.

Strong Ties to Denmark

The right to family and private life means that the authorities must assess the ties to Denmark, especially regarding children and adolescents, when deciding whether the revocation of a residence permit would cause a disproportionate disruption in their lives.

The European Court of Human Rights has not yet assessed any cases of Syrian refugees whose residence permits have been revoked in Denmark. Instead, the Danish legislation and the decision of immigration authorities rely on previous case law from the Court, which mainly concerns criminals who are facing expulsion as part of a sentence. According to several researchers and human rights organisations, this is a problematic comparison. The individuals who lose their temporary protection status are refugees in the process of inte-

grating. They are not criminals. The proportionality assessment weighing the refugee’s ties to Denmark against the state’s intervention cannot, therefore, be compared to the assessments made in decisions from the European Court of Human Rights regarding criminals and should be evaluated differently (Vedsted-Hansen 2022; Dansk Flygtningehjælp 2019a; Filskov et al. 2022). This means that the current Danish legislation and case law regarding the revocation of temporary residence permits does not rest on established practice from the European Court of Human Rights but rather operates in untested human rights territory.

Furthermore, it is questionable whether the requirement for “legitimacy” and “necessity” in Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights to conduct a serious intervention in an individual’s right to family and private life is met. According to Article 8, the intervention must be necessary “in the interests of national security, public safety or the economic well-being of the country,” and it is unclear which of these concerns necessitates the intervention in refugees’ family and private life (Vedsted-Hansen 2022).

Safety in the Country of Origin

The UNHCR and human rights organisations have criticised Denmark for not following the Refugee Convention’s criterion that improvements in the home country must be “fundamental, stable, and durable” as a guiding principle for the cessation of protection for all types of refugee status. Premature cessation of protection on an uncertain basis and deportations to countries still marked by conflict and fragile improvements are deemed to make sustainable solutions for return and protection impossible (UNHCR 2021, Human Rights Watch 2024).

Everyday Precarity: “You Can Never Feel Safe”

The consequences of the paradigm shift extend beyond the formal, legal elements and restrictions to the rights of refugees. Effects of the para-

digm shift are also present in the everyday life of refugees, causing serious negative effects on mental health, motivation for employment and education, the ability to build up social relations, and the fundamental feeling of (not) being protected against deportation (Krøyer et al. 2024).

Temporary residence permits among refugees are, in general, associated with poorer mental health compared to permanent residence permits. Uncertainty, waiting times, and limited rights contribute to higher levels of PTSD, depression, and anxiety symptoms (Momartin et al. 2006; Li et al. 2016; Newnham et al. 2019).

Uncertainty about the future hinders integration. Several Danish studies point out how temporary residence permits, especially under the paradigm shift focusing on temporariness and repatriation, create insecurity and uncertainty about the future for refugees (Kusk 2023; Dånge 2023; Dansk Flygtningehjælp 2019b). This uncertainty becomes a barrier to integration. The threat of being sent back to a place where they will face persecution fosters an underlying and unpredictable sense of danger, generating a feeling of insecurity akin to the uncertainty generated by prolonged conflict (Shapiro and Jørgensen 2019).

A 2024 qualitative research project investigates the lived experiences of young refugees aged 15 to 25, illuminating how the paradigm shift towards temporary protection affects them in profound and negative ways (Krøyer et al. 2024). A few key takeaways are described below; the names of the respondents have been anonymised.

Constant Worrying

The majority of the respondents report that the temporality of their residence status causes high levels of concern and stress in their daily lives. This is especially true during the often frequent and lengthy case processing of reassessing the

residence permits, but is also reported throughout the valid period.

Young refugees describe it as like having a “*permanent knot in the stomach*”, as a “*worry that is always with you*”, or “*a concern you can never get rid of*.” As Ibrahim explains, “*Well, it’s heavy. It’s like a weight on your shoulders that’s always there. That you can’t take off. It’s the worry, it just stays there.*” Many emphasize that it’s not just about concerns regarding their own residence permit, but also about family members. Some have concrete experiences with—and everyone has heard of—families being separated, such as brothers being allowed to stay while sisters or parents are required to leave.

Fear of Notifications

The temporary residence permit also manifests in daily life, as respondents refer to a constant fear of letters or notifications from public authorities in their *e-Boks*⁶. They all clearly remember where they were and what they were doing when they received notification that the immigration authorities would initiate reassessment procedures: At school, at soccer practice, on the way home from work.

Well, you get this notification: “You have received digital post from the Immigration Service in your e-Boks.” And I swear, every time you get such a notification ... Everything freezes in you. Is it now? Am I going to be deported? I remember sitting in the cafeteria at my high school and receiving it and just coming to a complete stop. It’s like a nightmare [...] And it’s still there.

— Zaid

⁶ The e-Boks is a digital post-box (<https://private.e-boks.com/>). Danish state administration has completed a full digitalisation in communication. All letters from state or municipality authorities arrive via E-boks, accompanied by a notification on the phone.

The notification about a letter from the immigration authorities—a beep in the pocket while at school or work—is a concrete manifestation of refugees’ constant worry about the temporality of their residence status.

Well, I’m busy with homework and work, but there’s still that fear of being called for an interview. It’s really every time, when you have to apply, it’s just there. That thing of: What now? What if I’m not allowed to stay? And then I have to, again, again, again go through it all. And I’ve already thought about it. What if it gets a bit more peaceful with the Taliban, right? In Afghanistan. What then? What about my life here? ... Yeah, so it’s just that, you know, you’re not seen as being equal with all your Danish friends ...

— Younes

It can also affect very intimate relationships:

It means something for many aspects of your life. For example, just something like getting a girlfriend. Can I even allow myself that? To get attached to another person? To attach another person to me? And then maybe be sent away soon. For me, it meant a lot.

— Zaid

Also, even at home with the family the atmosphere itself was very, very bad. So, regardless of the good things that happen, for example, I get

accepted at university, I succeed, I pass my exams, the atmosphere was like this: Yes, okay, we are happy, but we are not really happy. Because we don’t know if we can allow ourselves to be happy.

— Ibrahim

Welfare Precarity: Integration within a Deportation Frame

The paradigm shift also includes a number of legislative and procedural changes that affect refugee integration.⁷ Some of these changes are symbolic, aiming to highlight the intended new focus on return and short-term stay in Denmark, while others directly impact the rights of refugees and restrict the way social workers can support the integration procedures of individuals.

The main changes are:

- A mandatory obligation for social workers that stipulates social workers must inform refugees about the possibility of return and seek repatriation support during every counselling session.
- Replacing “integration” with “return and self-sufficiency” in all legal and social matters related to refugees. Accordingly, the former “integration program” is now named the “return and self-sufficiency program” and the former “integration benefit” is “return and self-sufficiency benefits”.
- Decreased social benefits for refugees. In 2024, the return and self-sufficiency benefits are up to 47 per cent lower than the social benefit available to Danish citizens, dependent on individual circumstances of age and caregiver responsibilities.

⁷ See <https://www.retsinformation.dk/eli/lta/2019/174>

→ Restricted access to full social benefits; refugees must have legally resided in Denmark for nine years and have been employed for at least two and a half years to be entitled to full, ordinary social benefits.

Integration of Refugees in Denmark

If an asylum seeker is granted asylum with any type of protection and thereby receives a temporary residence permit, they will be required to move to a designated municipality for the first three years and participate in a mandatory integration program. Newly arrived refugees are distributed across the country's municipalities according to a quota and distribution key, which reflects the population size and the number of refugees already in the municipality. Close family ties and current employment are taken into account in the distribution of refugees. However, if such ties are to the larger cities (Copenhagen, Aarhus), applications are often rejected, and the refugee is referred to a neighbouring municipality instead.

It is the responsibility of the municipal authorities to manage the first three years of the integration program. In practice, this falls to the social workers employed in the local employment or integration departments. The focus is on developing Danish language skills and finding employment, often starting with unpaid internships. Refugees attend mandatory meetings with the social worker about job seeking. After the implementation of the paradigm shift, these meetings also include mandatory guidance on repatriation and the possibility of returning to their country of origin. In case of unemployment, refugees are not entitled to receive the same benefits as Danish citizens for the first nine years of their stay.

Children start in public schools, either in reception classes or directly in regular classes, depending on how the individual municipality has organised the reception of refugee children. The municipality's organisation of integration efforts is supported and supplemented in many places by volunteers in NGOs and religious communi-

ties, who undertake a wide range of tasks, such as assistance with school homework, facilitating introductions to sports clubs, fostering social connection through friendship families, and mentorship for different professions.

Cuts in Social Benefits and Child Poverty

In 1999, Denmark introduced differentiated levels of social benefits in case of unemployment, making the level of benefit dependent on an individual's length of legal residence in Denmark, thereby leaving the traditional Scandinavian position of universal welfare benefits.

The name of and criteria for social benefits for refugees have changed several times since 1999, with the financial amount of the benefits lowered continuously. Starting with "introduction help" for refugees, this was changed to "start help" in 2002 and followed by another name change to "introduction benefit". Now, the "return and self-sufficiency benefits" amount to 53 to 55 per cent of the ordinary social benefits available to Danish citizens. For a brief period from 2012–2015, the lowered social benefits for refugees were abolished by a Social Democratic-Left government; this granted refugees the right to receive the same level of social support as Danish citizens. However, the lowered level was reintroduced in 2015 by a Liberal-Conservative government.

In 2019 and 2020, introducing the paradigm shift, the social benefits in case of unemployment were lowered by 1000 to 2000 kroner a month (dependent on civil status), and the criteria for obtaining the right to full, ordinary social benefits were further restricted to at least nine years of legal residence in Denmark and at least two and a half years of full employment during the last ten years. The lower, differentiated social benefits for refugees must be understood in the context of the lack of entitlement to other social benefits, in particular childcare benefits. Refugees build up the right to childcare benefits through a step-by-step principle, starting with 16 per cent of the full benefit level and slowly increasing over the next

six years of legal residence until full access to childcare benefits is obtained.

In a 2018 study, The Danish Institute for Human Rights examined the differentiated levels of social benefits, looking specifically at the lowered level for refugees, in order to see if the current legislation was in breach of the Danish Constitution or international conventions regarding discrimination (Garly Andersen et al. 2018). Notably, they looked at Section 75 (2) of the Danish Constitution, which stipulates that the state must secure a subsistence minimum for persons legally residing in Denmark. The study comprises a legal analysis, a qualitative survey, and calculations of the financial situation for families on integration benefits compared to national and international measures of poverty. Almost all of the calculations show that, even when combined with other benefits, integration benefits do not provide an adequate income to maintain a standard of living corresponding to a “necessary and modest” consumption level in Denmark, as defined by experts. That is, the families’ living expenses are higher than their income. In the examples, single-parent families with four children who have been in Denmark for six months have the lowest income and are 9,762 kroner short per month. In all the examples, the families’ income is lower than Statistics Denmark’s indicator for relative poverty. In line with research on poverty, hardship, and social exclusion, the report shows an overall accumulation of challenging conditions in several areas of life, including poor finances, weak social network, and limited participation in social activities.

Based on the study’s findings, the authors conclude that there are individuals in Denmark on integration benefits who do not receive the public benefits they need to uphold a subsistence income in accordance with the Danish Constitution (Garly Andersen et al. 2018). This is particularly the case for single individuals who have recently arrived in Denmark and couples with two or more children. Since the study reports were published, the integration benefits, now named “return and self-sufficiency” benefits, have been further reduced by 1000–2000 kroner a month.

Mandatory Mentions of Repatriation: “By the Way, Would You Like to Go Home?”

Repatriation is a supported, “voluntary” return to a country of origin. With the paradigm shift, counselling on the possibility of repatriation was made mandatory. In effect, social workers must highlight the possibility of returning each time they meet with a refugee. However, the rest of the meetings’ content centres on integration, as the social workers’ responsibility is implementing integration programmes (formally termed “return and self-sufficiency programs”), focusing on employment, language skills, and education. The legal and political enforcement of a focus on return in the midst of integration efforts has caused great frustration, concern, and criticism from social workers across municipalities.

The social workers unanimously articulate that the enforced focus on return has a negative impact on integration and the relations between social workers and refugees (Poulsen 2021).

But it complicates our work as social workers. On one hand, we say, “Wow, you’re doing great. You’re employed, you passed the Danish language test, etc.” And then, on the other hand, we say, “Oh, by the way, would you like to go home?” It seems untrustworthy to them. Or as if we are not honest people. We sit and cheer for their successful integration, and then on the other hand, we say, “You are unwanted.” That is actually what we are saying. Just in different words. And as a professional, I find it ... difficult.

– Osman

As mentioned, a legislative element of the paradigm shift is the exclusion of integration efforts and social ties to Denmark, i.e., employment and

education, from the reassessment during the renewal of refugee protection. Social workers across municipalities express frustrations and concerns regarding the lack of weight given to integration efforts, as it becomes demotivating and prevents refugees from being able to exercise autonomy over their own life situation. In effect, the social consequences of the paradigm shift become hindering for integration. This is highlighted by some examples from focus group interviews with young adult refugees on temporary residence enrolled in education (Krøyer et al. 2024) and social workers working with employment of newly arrived refugees (Poulsen 2021).

I just felt like lying in a corner and not doing a damn thing. Not doing anything at all, just giving up... That was often how it was.

– Younes

I do the math quite often: First I'll need to finish medicine at the university, and then plus four years of work. So, it means I won't be able to live in security for another 13 years. That's many years where I have to walk around only thinking that one day, I'll receive the same letter my parents got back then ...

– Omar

This excerpt from an interview with two caseworkers illustrates how counterproductive the new legal situation is for the integration of refugees:

Henriette: The temporariness creates insane amounts of stress and uncertainty amongst all refugees. Letters keep coming, and you have to constantly deal with it.

Heidi: Yes, and now they're coming more often because, it's every year.

Henriette: And it undermines our work. All the social efforts and the attempt to integrate. The temporariness causes more stress for families, and makes integration makes less sense: "Why should we learn Danish, why should we integrate into the local community, why should our children participate in leisure activities if we're not welcome here and will just be sent home?"

Heidi: The insecurity is on the agenda within the families all the time!

Conclusion: A Paradoxical Protection

With the implementation of the paradigm shift in Danish asylum and integration legislation, a new temporal element has been embedded in the foundation of this status. Residence permits for refugees are now short-term, temporary, and subject to frequent reassessments. Moreover, for the first eight years in Denmark, refugees cannot influence or secure their residence permits through integration efforts such as employment, education, or engagement in civil society. At the same time, there is a strong focus on repatriation, both symbolically and concretely. Social workers are mandated to always address the possibility of repatriation. Meanwhile, social benefits for refugees, the return and self-sufficiency benefit, have been continuously reduced, and are now equivalent to approximately half the amount of the ordinary social benefits for Danes.

Nevertheless, refugees live in Danish society. They must find work, learn Danish, send their children to school, and are expected to integrate as quickly as possible. The new framework expresses a paradoxical and contradictory imperative, simultaneously commanding the refugee to "Integrate!" and "Go home!" While the temporariness of protection means that refugees can never know if today will be the day they will receive a letter in their *E-boks* that cessation procedures have been initiated, they are at the same time expected – and trying – to

integrate with an eye toward a future in Denmark. This contradictory imperative, the temporary foundation under protection and integration, has at least two negative consequences: According to refugees, it has a devastating effect on “the sense of security that international protection is intended to provide” (UNHCR 2019, Paragraph 135), and, according to social workers across many municipalities, it has profoundly negative effects on integration.

Accordingly, another paradox emerges when analysing the consequences of the paradigm shift: It manages to be unsuccessful while still having significant impacts. The lack of success in relation to the declared goal to return refugees to their country of origin is evident. Very few refugees have actually repatriated or been deported to their country of origin after having their residence permits withdrawn (see also the chapter by Martin Bak Jørgensen in this volume), and 70 per cent of the recent attempts to revoke protection status from Syrian refugees have led to re-granting of protection. Nevertheless, the implementation of the paradigm shift has had far-reaching, negative effects: More than 2,000 refugees have undergone exhausting cessation procedures. These individuals end up with either a renewed, valid residence permit or residing in Denmark in harsh living conditions in detention camps, as Denmark has no diplomatic measures in place to deport them or move to neighbouring countries. The entire refugee population is strongly affected by the fear of cessation and deportation and the inability to secure their future through integration efforts, creating fear, uncertainty, demotivation, and hindering integration in society at large.

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The Danish “Paradigm Shift”

Consequences for Female Refugees and Marriage Migrants

by Anika Liversage

Introduction

In the small Scandinavian country of Denmark, the “immigrant question” has played a central political role for decades. In the 1980s and 1990s, Danish immigration legislation was very liberal (Gammeltoft-Hansen 2017). In 2001, in the wake of both a year-long Danish debate on immigration and the 9/11 terrorist attack on the World Trade Center, the situation changed radically. That year, a centre-right government (Venstre-Conservative People’s Party) gained office through the support of the radical right Danish People’s Party. In 2002, this government made significant legislative changes to immigration policy. The new laws made it more difficult to enter Denmark (particularly for marriage migrants) and for newcomers to remain in Denmark (Bech and Mouritsen 2013; Bissenbakker 2019; Schmidt 2014). Since then, legislation has become ever-stricter, particularly for lower-skilled individuals. Similar developments can be observed elsewhere in Europe (Kofman 2018).

As described by Stinne Østergaard Poulsen in Chapter 2, a two-step process in 2015 and 2019 has made residency in Denmark increasingly precarious and unpredictable. During the first phase in 2015, which coincided with what some have termed the European “refugee crisis” (Genova and Tazzioli 2016), the government introduced a new type of temporary asylum protection (Section 7.3) as an alternative to convention status and regular protection status. The new

status was linked with fewer and more restricted rights and aimed at protecting civilians against generalised violence (rather than against individual persecution). In 2019, under the umbrella term of a “paradigm shift” in Danish policies, the logic of temporality was extended to other types of refugee protection. Furthermore, access to residence security became much more difficult (Kreichauf 2020). Today, it not only takes at least eight years — and often much longer — to receive a permanent residency permit, but integration efforts and personal ties are also attributed less importance in the assessment processes.

In this chapter, I explore some of the consequences of this paradigm shift on female refugees and family migrants. I pay specific attention to the ways in which the heightened insecurity regarding residency can decrease women’s options for independent agency in their private lives, making it more difficult for them to leave unwanted marriages. The chapter thus brings out the hardships that this legislation can engender in a country that otherwise prides itself on being a “woman-friendly” welfare state with high levels of gender equality (Borchorst and Siim 2008; Hernes 1987).

Data and Methods

The chapter builds on 49 interviews with ethnic minority women and 58 interviews with service providers conducted between 2019 and 2024.

The interviews stem from two projects¹ that explore ethnic minority women's experiences of abuse and divorce. The interviewed women all had an ethnic minority background, predominantly with family ties to countries in the Middle East, South Asia, and North Africa. While some women had arrived in Denmark as adults (as refugees or as marriage migrants), others had arrived as children or had been born in Denmark to immigrant parents. The women were recruited for the interviews through diverse channels, including NGOs, social media posts, and personal networks. Women were interviewed either in Danish or in their mother tongue language. The author carried out interviews in Turkish, while bilingual research assistants did interviews in languages, including Arabic, Somali, and Tamil. All interviews had a life story approach, with women being asked to tell the story of their marriage, family troubles, and divorce (Bertaux 2003; Hollstein 2019). The other group of interviewees — service providers — were recruited on the basis of their extensive professional experience in helping ethnic minority women with troubled personal lives. Interviewees included municipality case workers, shelter personnel, specialised medical staff, and NGO employees. With informed consent, interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed (for non-European languages, the original language was translated into Danish or English). In the interview quotes, all names are pseudonyms, and personal details may have been altered to protect informant confidentiality.

Gendered Residency Status Precarity

The changes in Danish legislation have substantially increased insecurity for both men and women. It can be argued, however, that the increased insecurity affects women somewhat more than men. For example, women make up the majority of individuals holding the most insecure type of

asylum, temporary protection status according to Section 7.3 in Danish migration law. This type of protection can be revoked if the general conditions in the country of origin improve, even when conditions remain “serious and fragile” (Jacobsen 2022). The main reason for this gender difference is that women (unlike men) are not required to participate in military service and thus are less likely to be at risk of individual persecution due to, for example, fleeing conscription. Such gendered differences can also be found in cases with refugee families where daughters, but not sons, have lost their right to stay in Denmark when they turn 18 years old. The logic is that young men risk conscription if they return to a country at war (Køhler et al. 2024).

Another source of gendered precarity is related to marriage migration. There are two types of marriage migration: family *reunification* migration and family *formation* migration. In family reunification migration, spouses in already married couples relocate to Denmark. Such migration occurs after one of the spouses (often the man) gains a leave to remain. A common pattern is that after a refugee gains asylum, he sends for his wife, who then relocates to Denmark. In family *formation* migration, sponsoring spouses with legal residency in Denmark form new marriages by wedding individuals living abroad. These spouses subsequently join their partners in Denmark (Coleman 1994; Liversage and Jakobsen 2010). Both types of marriage migrants are generally dependent on the continuation of their marriage for their ability to remain in Denmark until they are able to gain residency status independent of their spouse. The structural inequality related to residency rights affects power relations between spouses and can contribute to making ties “toxic” (Del Real 2019).

Marriage migration is strongly gendered. If we focus on individuals from what Statistics Denmark

¹ Some of the interviews originate from an investigation of ethnic minority women and divorce commissioned by the Danish Ministry of Immigration and Integration (Liversage 2022a; Liversage and Petersen 2020). Other interviews are from the ongoing research project *Local dynamics in a transnational context – a study of exposure to abuse and options for support among ethnic minority women*. This project is financed by The Danish Victims Fund which has also supported the work with this chapter. The content is the sole responsibility of the author and does not necessarily reflect the views of The Council of The Danish Victims Fund.

terms “non-Western” countries², in 2023, over three times as many women arrived as marriage migrants as compared to men (Statistics Denmark 2024)³. In order to examine the consequences of different types of residence permits, a recent analysis of Danish registry data showed that the transition from a marriage migrant visa to an independent asylum visa reduces women’s risk of exposure to domestic violence. This effect can be observed regardless of whether women divorce their husbands or remain married to them. This type of change in visa status also has a significant positive impact on women’s embedding in the labour market. These results document a link between a more secure visa status and increases in women’s bargaining power (Hasager 2024).

A loss of residency rights can necessitate a return to the country of origin. A return to a country such as Syria can be very difficult for women and men alike due to, for example, the negative response to individuals considered to have “defected” from a country in conflict. However, women can also face particular gendered risks if forced to return, especially if they return as divorcees. These gendered risks are linked to complex dynamics and can vary substantially between different countries of origin and different strata of societies. A grave example of a country where women face substantial hardships is present-day Afghanistan. In fact, in January 2023, Afghan women’s rights deteriorated so significantly that the Danish Refugee Appeals Board issued a statement. The statement concluded that simply being female in Afghanistan amounted to hardships great enough to constitute persecution according to the Refugee Convention. Consequently, women from Afghanistan could subsequently gain asylum in Denmark (Section 7.1) based solely on their gender (Flygtningenaevnet 2023).

While the situation in Afghanistan today can be considered extreme, the life conditions for wom-

en in the Middle East and beyond are often difficult, especially compared to Denmark. Consider a topic such as divorce. According to data from the World Values Survey (2022), views on divorce are very lenient in Denmark: 60 per cent find that divorce can “always” be justified. Furthermore, men and women have the same rights to apply for a no-fault divorce. In contrast, only 2–5 per cent of the populations in countries such as Iraq, Iran, and Lebanon find that divorce can “always” be justified. These more negative views on divorce occur in societal contexts where women can have great difficulties surviving economically on their own, as the female employment rates are low.⁴ In combination with poverty and the absence of well-developed welfare states, many women are dependent on marriage for survival (Cindoglu et al. 2011). Furthermore, women’s conduct in intimate matters may be an issue of considerable family concern and can include the expectation that unmarried women remain virgins (Littrell and Bertsch 2013; Payton 2015). In this context, female divorce can be seen as breaching norms of sexual propriety, damaging “family honour”, and, in some cases, leads to family sanctions against female members (Bhanbhro et al. 2016; Khan 2018). Furthermore, in countries with Islamic family law, women’s access to divorce is generally more difficult than men’s (Moghadam 2008). Consequently, women who are dissatisfied with their marriages may – at least in the lesser educated strata of origin societies – remain married, even when their husbands are abusive, rather than opt for divorce (Al-Natour et al. 2019; Gharaibeh and Oweis 2009; Zakar et al. 2012).

Women also have more difficulties than men when it comes to fulfilling present Danish demands for gaining a permanent residence permit. Both refugees and marriage migrants (men as well as women) are in insecure positions until they gain their own independent and permanent

² Statistics Denmark make a distinction between Western and non-Western countries. Western countries are all EU countries and Andorra, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Monaco, Norway, San Marino, Switzerland, Vatican State, Canada, USA, Australia, and New Zealand. All other countries are referred to as non-Western countries (Statistics Denmark 2017).

³ In 2023, such visas were granted to 451 men and 1426 women (Statistics Denmark 2024).

⁴ To use Syria as an example, just 16 per cent of women are in the labor market (World Economic Forum 2021, p. 14). Consequently, women are often economically dependent on others for survival (Khoury and Wehbi 2016; Nasser-Eddin and Mhaissen 2020).

residence permits. The demands for gaining such a permit have increased substantially over time. In the late 1990s, it took a three-year stay in Denmark to gain a right to remain. In 2002, this temporal demand (the so-called “probationary period”) was extended to seven years (Amnesty International 2006). Today, in 2024, marriage migrants and refugees must wait eight years before they can apply for a permanent residency permit. Furthermore, they must also fulfill other demands regarding both employment and Danish skills – demands that men are generally better qualified to fulfil than women (Bendixen 2023; Jensen et al. 2021; Liversage 2009).

This situation is not only problematic for the women themselves but also for the professionals who meet such women. One example of how the general insecurity is perceived by service providers comes from a 2022 interview with a medical doctor working in a specialised clinic for ethnic minority patients with complex challenges. The doctor said that her patients not only come with substantial physical and mental problems but they generally also grapple with social and economic challenges (also related to the reduced social benefits for refugees, see Chapter 2). Adding to this, the doctor reported:

[Patients today face] uncertainty regarding their residence status. Due to the new rules, virtually all new refugees only get a two-year residency and constantly have to apply again. The result is that, as compared to the past, they both have more problems, and more severe problems. Because you are in a constant application phase: it takes a long time to make your application, and after you submit it, it often takes 8–10 months to get a response. And you have to apply every two years. So they just live with chronic uncer-

tainty. And then it is really difficult to work with chronic pain and with psychiatric or psychological challenges. It is also really hard to get a job when the boss doesn't know if you might be thrown out of the country soon. I think that if we could just give people more stable residency permits, we would probably be able to shut down the clinic – or at least reduce our patient flow. Because [the insecurity regarding residency] undoubtedly worsens their symptoms.

For some migrant women, the prolonged insecurity of residency permits and the looming danger of return reduce their scope for agency. In the next sections, I explore the consequences of this insecure visa status (Danish Institute for Human Rights 2022). I begin by discussing the experiences of Syrian women who have recently arrived in Denmark. Some of their troubles are linked to the most precarious type of residency permit, Section 7.3 temporary asylum protection.

Hardships of Recently Arrived Refugee Women

The story of Hanan, a Syrian woman whose experiences are related to the Section 7.3 residency permit, can illustrate the intersection of precarious status and gender-based violence. Hanan's husband fled Syria on his own in 2015. After he gained asylum in Denmark, Hanan arrived in Denmark with a family reunification permit. Hanan's husband was abusive, and at one point, Hanan turned to her Danish caseworker for help, telling how her husband had threatened to kill both Hanan and their children. The case worker helped Hanan to both apply for an independent residency permit as a refugee (Section 7.3) and for divorce. Hanan thus left her abusive husband and remained in Denmark. Her children were, however, still linked to her husband's somewhat

more secure residency permit: as a man of conscription age (18–42 years), he was considered to have an individual need for protection because he had escaped military service. The ex-husband gloated over the fact that the divorce had made Hanan's residency situation more vulnerable: He would tell her:

[The Danish authorities will ...] throw you out, because you only have a [residence permit according to section] 7.3.

The situation made Hanan say:

I'm afraid. Because if they send me back, they send me back to hell. And what about my children? Would they stay here? Would I never see them again?

Hanan opted for divorce despite the insecurity it would bring her. However, not all women in bad marriages dare to do so. Another Syrian refugee woman, Selda, shared that she had started an application for divorce after arriving in Denmark. However, when she realised how vulnerable a divorce would leave her, she cancelled her petition. She said:

I cannot leave his shadow here in Denmark [...]. A divorce would affect my children and I don't want that. What we Syrian women want is security. They cannot leave us on the swing that we swing on. The [Section] 7.3 – all these rules. It is as if the earth suddenly opened up. We can't sleep anymore. We want to be treated as human beings. We need security. To feel safe.

Knowing how much worse her situation would be if she later had to return to Syria as a divorcee rather than as a married woman, Selda felt compelled to withdraw her application for divorce. The interviews with Hanan and Selda were conducted in 2019. Since then, the uncertainty regarding staying in Denmark has only increased. In 2020, the Danish Immigration Service began to withdraw the residence permits of several refugees from Syria on the basis of an assessment that a return to, for example, Damascus and the surrounding area could be considered "safe enough" (ECRE 2021). Several countries in the EU expressed strong criticism about this policy, especially given that the Danish assessments of the security situation in Syria differed significantly from the assessments of other countries (Hagedorn and Albrechtsen 2022). The UN also criticised Denmark's approach to the protection of refugees (UNHCR 2022). In the next section, I give another example of how Danish legislation can negatively impact refugee women. The example comes from a Syrian refugee, whom I call Warda.

Warda's Story

Before the war, Warda was employed in the health sector in one of Syria's largest cities. Her fiancé had been killed a few years before, and she was, therefore, still unmarried in her early thirties. After the war in Syria broke out, the security situation in the region where she and her family lived grew worse. In response, Warda talked about how the men in her family decided that she had to get married:

My father and my brother sat together and discussed what might happen if the regime's army entered the city. If they were raping women who were already married, you wouldn't really be able to notice. But if they raped virgins – women who had never been married – it would be evident, so it was

better to be married first. So they convinced me to marry [the man they had in mind].

This change in Warda's life exemplifies both the centrality attributed to women being married, family involvement in women's conduct of their intimate lives, and the precarity of living in a war-torn country. The background for Warda's marriage was that the first wife of the husband-to-be had suffered a breakdown following a bomb attack that had nearly killed the couple's 4-year-old son and newborn daughter. As the wife had become unable to take care of the two children, Warda's husband-to-be brought his first wife to her parents and effected a unilateral divorce; unilateral divorces are available for husbands (but not wives) under Syrian law (UNDP 2018). The man then married Warda, who took over practical responsibility for the children. The husband quickly turned out to be violent, but due to their marriage, Warda had to live with the abuse. A while later, in 2014, the man fled Syria, leaving Warda alone with his children for two years — first in Syria and then on a gruelling flight to Europe. When Warda was reunited with her husband in Denmark in 2016, she had become deeply attached to the children, who by then had turned two and six.

One of the first things Warda's husband told her was that he had mainly needed her to bring his children to Denmark and that he no longer wanted her as a wife. The message rattled Warda, who had no idea of what to do in a foreign country. Consequently, she tried to stay with her husband, regardless of him subjecting her to both physical and psychological violence. In the end, the man physically kicked her out of the apartment, and Warda had to turn to the Danish authorities for help. The following then happened:

When I told my case manager that he wanted a divorce, she told me that I would then be

sent back to Syria. I said I would kill myself rather than return to Syria. I didn't want to be ashamed... I thought: "Then why should I live?" So I took all the pills I had at once.

The fact that Warda attempted suicide rather than return to Syria as an "ashamed" divorced woman exemplifies the predicament of returning to a country of origin after a divorce. In fact, a recent report on the situation in Syria states that while women in general face a range of problems in the country, widows and divorced women "were particularly at risk of sexual violence, emotional and verbal abuse, forced marriage, polygamy and serial temporary marriages, movement restrictions [and] financial exploitation" (EUAA 2024, p. 94).

In Warda's case, her fear of returning to Syria was exacerbated by her family situation: Warda and her husband were relatives, and to avoid being held responsible for the divorce, Warda's husband had contacted Warda's parents in Syria, blaming the divorce on his wife:

[He told the parents] ... that I wanted to live like the women of Europe. He said that their daughter wanted to have a boyfriend and didn't want to live like us but like the European girls. That she wanted to go out and "... didn't want the life I [the husband] could give her, and that it is your daughter who wanted the divorce". So that is why my father and brother won't talk to me. And they have said that if I come back to Syria, they will kill me.⁵

⁵ If sufficiently well documented, such serious family threats can indeed constitute grounds for gaining asylum.

With the claim that Warda wanted a divorce because she wanted a “boyfriend”, Warda’s husband portrayed her as a woman who had broken with cultural and religious expectations in favour of a Western life (Rabo et al., 2021). Reportedly, Warda’s father even said that her divorce was due to her “*wanting to be a whore*”. An entire family’s honour is tarnished if a female member is considered to be “*a whore*”, and a solution for the family can be to ostracise or even kill the woman (Bhanbhro et al. 2016; Standish 2014). Regardless of the fact that Warda was a well-educated woman from a big city, her divorce (which she did not even want herself) thus meant that her life in her country of origin was threatened, and she attempted suicide rather than having to return to Syria.

After the failed suicide attempt, Warda learned that the municipal caseworker had given her incorrect information about her need to return: while Warda had arrived in Denmark as a marriage migrant, she was also a refugee. She was thus able to apply for her own individual residency permit. Nevertheless, the “return turn” of the paradigm shift (Vedsted-Hansen 2022) makes it difficult for Warda to know if she will risk being evicted from Denmark sometime in the future.

Barriers for Women in Securing Leave to Remain

Hanan, Selda, and Warda were all female Syrian refugees who had only been in Denmark for a short period of time. However, the agenda of temporality and return in Danish immigration legislation also affects women who have lived much longer in Denmark. As described earlier, the probationary period is now eight years long⁶, which can be a very long time to remain in a bad marriage for fear of return. Other demands also apply. For example, applicants must show that they have worked full-time for at least three and a half out of the preceding four years and must pass a Danish language test at a given level.

Men generally have an easier time fulfilling these demands, as they, on average, have more work experience, more education, and fewer care and domestic responsibilities than women.

One example of how women can be at risk of losing their status, even when they have lived in Denmark for more than the eight-year probationary period, is the story of Ayan. In 2010, Ayan arrived in Denmark as a family formation migrant when she married a Somali refugee who was settled in Denmark. The couple soon had a son, Abdi, who had a developmental disorder. Ayan studied Danish and successfully passed several language exams. She also worked, but only part-time, as her son needed extra care. The son’s condition also meant he needed to attend a special school. In 2019, Ayan’s husband suddenly left the family and moved to Somalia. When Ayan subsequently tried to renew the temporary residency permits for herself and her son, she was told that they had to leave Denmark. At the time, Ayan had lived in Denmark for a decade, and her 9-year-old son Abdi had been born and raised in Denmark. Nevertheless, they were told that they did not qualify for a residence permit now that Ayan no longer lived with her husband, since she could not meet the other criteria. First, Ayan had not worked full-time for the required 3½ years and thus did not fulfil the employment criteria — nevermind that her employment history was due to her son’s special needs. Second, as part of the paradigm shift legislation, time spent in Denmark before starting school does not count in the assessment of whether children have a strong, personal connection to Denmark. Consequently, Abdi was seen as having limited attachment to Denmark, regardless of having lived there since birth and having attended Danish preschool before starting the school for children with developmental disabilities.

Regardless of the fact that Ayan had no family left in Somalia, the Danish authorities told her to leave Denmark. At this point in time, however, Ayan gained support from the NGO Refugees Welcome. The NGO reframed her case to centre

⁶ There are exceptions, mostly relevant for individuals with higher levels of skills, see www.nyidanmark.dk.

her son, Abdi, drawing attention to the fact that his special needs could not be met in Somalia. With this appeal approach, the son Abdi was granted a residency permit, and Ayan was able to get a residency permit contingent on her son's. It is uncertain, however, what Ayan's status will be when her son turns 18.⁷

Another example of how women's status can be precarious for many years comes from the marriage migrant Geeti. Similar to Ayan, above, Geeti also had problems related to the work-criteria. Geeti arrived in Denmark in 2008 after marrying a Danish man she had met in Sri Lanka. Only days after arriving in Denmark, she began working with serving food in an amusement park stall. After a while, Geeti began looking for a job that she could hold year-round, and she entered the care sector as an unskilled worker. This sector faces severe staff shortages, and Geeti's supervisor proposed that Geeti should start studying to become an assistant nurse. This advice aligns with trends across Denmark, where individuals are generally told to pursue education to better embed themselves in a demanding labour market, rather than remain in unskilled work.

Geeti happily agreed and began studying. During this time, Geeti's marriage with her Danish husband ended and she fell in love with and married an EU citizen living in Denmark. This marriage turned out to be troubled: unbeknownst to Geeti, the husband suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder from years in the military, and he also struggled with substance abuse. One day, the husband left both Denmark and Geeti and returned to his country of origin. When Geeti had to renew her leave to remain, she discovered that she did not fulfil the work criterion because she had been studying. Consequently, even though Geeti had lived in Denmark for more than a decade, had never received Danish welfare support, and had valuable experience in the high-demand care work sector, she lost her right to remain. Thus, in 2021, she had

to leave Denmark and return to Sri Lanka, where she faced considerable hardships as a divorcee.⁸

The stories of these two women illustrate the vulnerability of marriage migrant women, even when they have lived a decade or more in Denmark. Their vulnerabilities are gendered. Not only are the majority of marriage migrants women, but it is also generally mothers, rather than fathers, who work part-time when a family member has to care for a child with special needs, for example, and are thus less likely to meet the employment requirement for permit renewal.

Legislation Complicating the Situation for Service Providers

Geeti's story in the preceding section illuminates the clash between a general Danish encouragement to become educated and the fact that education does not count in relation to residency rights (Vitus and Jarlby 2022). Another contradiction occurs between the precarity related to residency rights and general Danish legislation, which makes the country an *"interventionist welfare-state system that intervenes universally at early stages"* (Hestbæk et al. 2023, p. 113). Such interventions predominantly occur in relation to children, as research documents the harm of growing up with violence (Carlson et al. 2019). Consequently, if Danish social authorities learn that children live in homes with domestic abuse, they can demand that women either leave their violent partners or else the authorities may proceed to remove the children and place them in care (Socialstyrelsen 2022). Marriage migrant women may, however, have difficulties acting according to the Danish social policy expectations. Unable to return to their countries of origin in case of divorce, they may remain with abusive husbands (Del Real 2019; Liversage 2022b). They may be forced to stay with men whose power over them is reinforced by the Danish legislation itself (Innes et al. 2024; Segrave 2021).

⁷ Based on Bendixen (2023, p. 74), <https://refugeeswelcome.dk/cases/ayan-og-abdi/>, and personal communication with Michala Bendixen, Refugees Welcome, April 15, 2023.

⁸ Based on Bendixen (2023) and an interview with Geeti (2024).

Service providers face difficulties when dealing with such issues. An example comes from a social worker who herself had refugee parents. The social worker reported that her own mother had been “forced to stay” in a very bad marriage for years and was only able to leave the marriage after the mother had earned her own independent residency permit. In her present work in a municipality, the interviewed social worker shared that she regularly encountered women who did not dare to leave bad marriages for fear of what would become of them. The social worker said that the women:

... don't feel like they have a choice. I can counsel them for a hundred years, but it won't make any difference. Because [when the women ask about residency, I have to answer:] 'Well, we can't do anything about that'. It is a very frustrating situation.

Furthermore, when it comes to children's well-being, it can be hard to assess if it is in the best interest of a child to push a mother to leave an abusive husband if the end result may be that the mother is forced to leave Denmark because of divorce. The situation can place public employees in a tough predicament. On the one hand, they are mandated by law to report to the authorities if they learn that a child is exposed to violence in the family. On the other hand, social workers may feel tempted not to do so for fear of the consequences due to the interplay between women leaving their husbands and access to residency rights. Such violence against weakly positioned migrant women can go on for many years (Liversage 2022a; Liversage and Petersen 2020). An employee from an NGO that tried to aid abused ethnic minority women reported that some of the women they met:

... lived completely isolated lives. They have lived in confinement and have been beaten to pieces. And they don't even know the language. Where should they go? They are afraid of losing their residency – because the man has used that [i.e. losing the residency if the women leave them] as a threat against them.

In many countries, including Denmark⁹, women may indeed be able to get a residency permit if they can document that they suffer domestic violence. However, this legal provision can be difficult to make use of in practice, both due to a lack of access to information about rights and the hard-to-meet documentation requirements. After all, if women do not call the police or do not tell the truth when visiting the emergency room, no reports can later document their often years-long exposure to abuse (Mirza 2016; Qureshi 2020). A recent report from the Danish Institute for Human Rights concluded that the Danish legislation in its present form is too restrictive to adequately protect abused immigrant women (Slot et al. 2023).

Furthermore, it takes not only knowledge of the legislation but also trust in the authorities for women with an insecure residence status to dare leave their husbands. The paradigm shift legislation appears to have contributed to decreasing the trust that ethnic minorities hold in the authorities (Dånge 2023). An NGO employee describes the situation in Denmark in the following way:

Now, everyone is really afraid of being sent out, even if they have a permanent residence permit. And it indeed seems like such a thing might happen. It probably won't [happen], but that is what it sounds like when you hear the news.

⁹ The Aliens Act, section 19.7.

The insecurity regarding residency permits also affects young people who have been raised (and sometimes even been born) in Denmark. For instance, a loss of the right to remain can arise for young women who have arrived in Denmark as dependents to refugee parents when they turn 18 years old. As women are not conscripted into the army, some such individuals subsequently lose their leave to remain. The Danish authorities categorise them as “adults” who are able to return on their own to the country they fled with their families.¹⁰ Another source of insecurity can arise for children who inherit an insecure residency status from their parents. Such youth have a window around age 18 where they can apply for Danish citizenship (if they fulfil a number of other criteria).¹¹ A social worker shared the following about how these rules impacted a young woman she had been supporting:

We had a Somali girl [in the municipality], whose mother was mentally ill. When the girl was under 18, the municipality placed her in care. She had a room and some support – which was me. And then she turns 18 and she receives a letter saying that she was to be thrown out of the country. She was born in Denmark. But her mother had a convention passport [given to refugees, i.e. the mother did not have permanent Danish residency]. Then you have to apply for your own residency permit before you turn 18, but nobody had told her that. It was a nightmare. I tried to help. I also spoke to the municipality

and said “it is your responsibility, because you are the ones who placed her in care”.

The strict rules regulating access to both permanent residency and Danish citizenship also have a more general impact on Danish society. A recent analysis from the Danish Institute of Human Rights shows that from 1980 to 2023, the share of Danish inhabitants without citizenship increased from 1.9 per cent to 10.5 per cent (Danish Institute for Human Rights 2023, p. 5). As citizenship is a prerequisite for voting in national elections, a substantial minority in Denmark is unable to vote for parliament — a development which can be considered a present and growing problem in a liberal democracy.

Discussion

The “return turn” of the paradigm shift in Denmark has made life for many immigrants and refugees much more precarious. It has relegated individuals with an insecure residence status to unskilled work for years — something which seems a waste of human resources in a demanding labour market (Dånge 2023; Vitus and Jarlby 2022). The insecurity about the future, where permission to stay in Denmark is only granted for a limited period, revokable and with the looming risk of non-renewal, undermines the trust ethnic minorities can vest in Danish society. Fundamentally, trust — which can be considered society’s glue (Möllering 2001; Simmel 1950) — is about expectations of an always uncertain future. Today, newcomers to Denmark thus have to ask themselves, for example, if investing in learning Danish will be a good decision or a waste of time (Dånge 2023)? Will it make sense to buy a new washing machine if one’s residency status is so fragile (Mortensen 2023)? Moreover, as stated by

¹⁰ See, for example, the cases of Aya from Syria (2021; <https://nyheder.tv2.dk/samfund/2021-04-02-udvisning-af-gymnasieelev-vaekker-forargelse-hvad-har-jeg-gjort-forkert>), Usna from Afghanistan (2022; <https://www.sn.dk/frederikssund-kommune/i-chok-over-udvisning-udvist-fra-2-g-til-taleban-regime/>) and Hibatullah from Iraq (2023; <https://www.information.dk/debat/2023/06/20-aarige-hibas-udvisnings-sag-endnu-eksempel-paa-folk-udvises-uden-grund>).

¹¹ The rules are subject to change. For present rules, see www.nyidanmark.dk.

the medical doctor in the first part of this chapter, the “return turn” also undermines the health of already vulnerable individuals.

The extended insecurity about where in the world one’s future will unfold makes it difficult for individuals to act in the present. While divorce can be the right choice for women in troubled marriages if their future is Danish, it can be a disastrous choice in case of a country-of-origin return (Al-Natour et al. 2019; Nasser-Eddin and Mhaissen 2020). While a continued marriage can be the right choice if women later have to leave Denmark, it might turn out to be an unnecessary precaution that wears down both women and children. When women remain in dysfunctional and abusive marriages for fears related to their residency rights, this clashes with some of the most fundamental principles of Danish social policy, principles which aim to protect children from harm (Hestbæk et al. 2023). This situation results from the paradigm shift legislation in Denmark today.

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Consequences of the Parallel Society Legislation on Affected Residents

Unsafety, Spatial Divides, and Exclusion at a Local and National Scale

by Rebecka Söderberg

Introduction

On March 1st, 2018, a delegation of eight ministers launched their new “Ghetto package” at a press conference at the Mjølnerparken community house, a multi-ethnic public housing neighbourhood in Copenhagen, Denmark. The stated purpose of this policy was to increase safety and integration, mainly by striving to create a more “balanced resident composition” in public housing neighbourhoods through physical transformations and a mix of tenure types (Regeringen 2018). The legislative changes were passed by the Danish parliament in November 2018. This meant that the number of public housing units for families in Mjølnerparken—and in 14 other neighbourhoods designated “hard ghettos” by the Danish government in 2018—had to be reduced to 40 per cent of the existing housing stock by the year 2030 (Folketinget 2018). In 2021, the term “ghetto” was replaced with “parallel society”, and “hard ghettos” were relabelled “transformation areas”. This chapter explores the consequences of the parallel society legislation for Mjølnerparken and its residents.¹

The goals of the parallel society legislation echo the aims of social mix policies, which have become common across the Western world during the past decades. Social mix policies strive to re-

duce inequalities and increase integration through tenure diversification, often focusing on public housing neighbourhoods. Their proponents suggest this will lead to increased social interaction across classes. However, studies point to a lack of expected results and show that social mix policies often cause gentrification and displacement of racialised and low-income groups (Lees 2008; Lees and Hubbard 2022; Mele 2019).

Research exploring the ongoing transformations initiated through the parallel society legislation indicates that there are serious side effects of this social mix strategy; demolitions and relocations cause unsafety, the “ghetto list” contributes to stigmatisation, and residents have been left without influence on the implementation process (Bech-Danielsen et al. 2021; Christensen et al. 2022a). Furthermore, earlier studies have highlighted how hegemonic and dystopic narratives about public housing neighbourhoods are contested by residents who express positive sentiments about their neighbourhoods (Jensen and Christensen 2012; Mazanti 2002). However, as transformations are currently in the making and not yet finalised, the majority of previous studies on the topic focus on analysing the ghetto policies or the redevelopment plans. This literature has shown how the ghetto policies are them-

¹ The 2018 policy includes four components: the physical transformation of neighbourhoods; restrictions on who can move in; increased police presence and higher sentences; and initiatives focused on children and young people (Regeringen 2018: 8–9). This chapter focuses primarily on the first component, addressing the legislative changes concerning housing.

selves constructing “ghettos” rather than addressing existing realities (Olsen and Larsen 2023; Schultz Larsen 2011; Simonsen 2016) and that the parallel society legislation is an urban b/ordering practice, striving for a certain social order and exclusion of those perceived as “the Other” (Lundsteen 2023). In addition, scholars have recently described ghetto policies as expressions of racial neoliberalism, as commodification is legitimised through racialising discourses (Risager 2023; Söderberg 2024).

Previous studies have thus mainly focused on analysing policies; the consequences these policies have while being implemented, from residents’ perspectives specifically, has yet to be analysed. In this chapter, I highlight the experiences of residents in Mjølnerparken, a neighbourhood undergoing partial sale due to the parallel society legislation. Mjølnerparken provides a suitable case to study, as the transformations are scheduled to be completed earlier here than in the other neighbourhoods (Christensen et al. 2022a: 69). Nonetheless, Mjølnerparken is also a special case; it is relatively small, centrally located, and one of the neighbourhoods where the residents’ protests have been most visible. Although the findings from this particular place should not be generalised, they are warning examples and point to issues that deserve special attention in the study of transformations in other areas in Denmark and beyond. Building on empirical data generated through fieldwork in Mjølnerparken and developing the concept of “encapsulative bordering”, I underscore the contradictory consequences of the parallel society legislation.

The Danish Parallel Society Legislation

While Denmark was once a country with a liberal migration policy, its migration and integration policies have continuously been tightened, and the general attitude towards migrants in the public debate has become more hostile since the 2000s (Hervik 2012). These attitudes are ex-

pressed in other policy areas as well. Through political concerns about “vulnerable housing areas” that emerged in the 1990s, immigrant integration and urban policies have become entangled. Bill L38, commonly known as the parallel society legislation of 2018, is an amendment to the Public Housing Act. It is in line with the “paradigm shift” (Bill L140), which consisted of changes in the migration, integration, and repatriation law and was approved in February 2019 (Rytter et al. 2023). While the paradigm shift focuses on removing migrants from the national territory, the parallel society legislation focuses on governing the mobility of racialised groups within the nation. Nonetheless, these policies are connected, as the 2018 ghetto policy depicted problems at the local scale as reasons for maintaining or even doubling down on a restrictive migration policy (Lundsteen 2023).

The parallel society legislation contains criteria neighbourhoods must meet to be impacted, along with concrete measures to change the resident composition in the listed neighbourhoods, such as rules about the physical transformation of designated neighbourhoods, changes related to under which circumstances tenants can be evicted, and restrictions of who can move into the listed neighbourhoods (Folketinget 2018). The parallel society legislation is based on the “list of parallel societies”, also known as the “ghetto list”, which has been launched yearly by the Danish state since 2010. The criteria for ending up on the list are based on measurements of the resident composition in public housing neighbourhoods with more than 1,000 residents. In 2018, the list was divided into 3 categories. The parallel society legislation states that a neighbourhood is designated as a “vulnerable housing area” if it meets two of the criteria described below.²

1. The proportion of residents aged 18–64 without relation to either the labour market or educational system exceeds an average of 40% over the past two years.

² This is Fallov and Birk’s (2022: 220) English translation of these criteria.

2. The proportion of residents convicted of violation of the Penal Code, the Gun Law or the Act on Euphoriant Substances amounts to at least three times the national average when calculated as the average over the past two years.
3. The proportion of residents aged 30–59 who only have basic education exceeds 60% of all residents in the same age group.
4. The average gross income for residents aged 15–64 in the area (excluding students in further education) is less than 55% of the average gross income of the same group within the region (Folketinget 2018).

In addition, a neighbourhood is designated as a “parallel society” (until 2021, the official term used was “ghetto”) if it meets two criteria and more than 50 per cent of the residents are “immigrants and descendants³ from non-Western countries” (Folketinget 2018: 3). If a neighbourhood has appeared on the list of parallel societies for 5 years, it is designated as a “transformation area” (until 2021 called a “hard ghetto”). In 2021, a fourth category was added to the list: neighbourhoods where immigrants and descendants make up more than 30 per cent of the population and which meet two criteria similar to those above are designated as “preventive areas”.

In accordance with the parallel society legislation, the housing organisations in neighbourhoods designated as transformation areas must reduce the share of public housing family units to 40 per cent by the year 2030. This can be done through demolition, sale, construction of new housing units, or conversion of family housing units into senior or youth housing. On a national level, welfare and politics editors from *Mandag Morgen* estimated that around 11,000 public housing tenants would have to be relocated as a result of this legislation (Andersen and Reiermann 2019). The list and legislation have been accused of racial and ethnic discrimination

by the Danish Institute for Human Rights and UN human rights experts due to the fact that a neighbourhood can only be designated a “parallel society” if the percentage of “non-Western immigrants and descendants” is above 50 (OHCHR 2020). The relocations disproportionately affect “non-Western immigrants and their descendants” since only those neighbourhoods where many “non-Westerners” live can be designated as “parallel societies” or “transformation areas”. Nevertheless, once a neighbourhood is on the list, the relocations affect all residents of the listed neighbourhood. The discrimination, stigmatisation, and forced relocations have sparked resistance among affected residents in public housing neighbourhoods across Denmark, who are challenging the government narratives and taking legal action to hinder privatisation and displacement (Fabian and Lund Hansen 2020; Söderberg 2024). The parallel society legislation has also been criticised for damaging the public housing sector (which is home to almost 20 per cent of the Danish population) since *Landsbyggefonden* [National Building Fund], which tenants contribute to through their rent, has to finance the required demolitions and renovations.

In Mjølnerparken, the implications of the parallel society legislation were immediately felt by residents, as the housing organisation decided upon a redevelopment plan in 2019 that included the sale of two out of the four housing blocks, 260 apartments, in order to meet the parallel society legislation requirements. These drastic changes were initiated in the context of already ongoing local interventions for social mix. In 2015, the residents of Mjølnerparken approved a *Helhedsplan* [Master Plan], which included renovations, construction of new youth housing, the conversion of apartments into shops and daycare, and architectural changes aimed at improving safety and connecting the neighbourhood with its surroundings. The new redevelopment plan sparked by the parallel society legislation added the sale of the apartments in two housing blocks and

³ People are classified as immigrants if they were born outside Denmark to non-Danish parents, and as descendants if they were born in Denmark but neither of their parents was born in Denmark and have Danish citizenship. This category therefore includes people who are Danish citizens and people who were born and raised in Denmark.

meant that the planned temporary relocations (due to the renovation) would be replaced by permanent relocations. Thus, the majority of Mjølnerparken's residents would not be allowed to stay and see the results of the renovation. Instead, they would be relocated to other public housing neighbourhoods.

Fieldwork in Mjølnerparken

The empirical data for this study was generated through fieldwork conducted in Mjølnerparken from August 2021 to January 2023 as part of the data collection for my PhD thesis. This chapter builds on the findings of my thesis (see Söderberg 2024). Mjølnerparken is a multi-ethnic public housing neighbourhood with 1,700 residents located in the city district of Nørrebro in Copenhagen, Denmark. Historically a working-class neighbourhood, a slow gentrification that began in the 1990s is driving a process of hipsterification in Nørrebro (Lund Hansen and Karpantschof 2016). Today, Nørrebro is known for its diversity, cultural scene, and activism, and was proclaimed to be the World's Coolest Neighbourhood by Time Out in 2021 (Time Out PR 2021). However, Mjølnerparken struggles with a reputation of being "immigrant dense", unsafe, and a place of gang-related crime and radicalisation. In 2018, there were over 40 nationalities represented in the neighbourhood and 82.5 per cent of residents were categorised as "non-Western immigrants and descendants" even though 67.7 per cent of the residents had Danish citizenship (Kammersgaard 2020). In addition, Mjølnerparken met all five criteria to receive the ghetto designation. Nonetheless, decreased proportions of immigrants and descendants, unemployment, and criminality can be observed in the neighbourhood in the years before the parallel society legislation was approved (Stender et al. 2022). This change was initiated through local community work and the use of flexible rentals, which means that people in education or employment can be prioritised when apartments are leased. Local community work in the shape of *boligsociale helhedsplaner* [revitalisation plans] has been present in the neighbourhood since 2008 with initiatives for improving safety, preventing

crime, and increasing the levels of education, employment, and participation in leisure activities among residents (Christensen et al. 2022b). An ongoing local process of social and physical transformation was thus disrupted through the introduction of the parallel society legislation.

My fieldwork included participant observation at meetings and events, informal conversations, semi-structured interviews, walking conversations with residents, and visual methods involving children. I was particularly interested in studying residents' experiences of and resistance to ongoing social mix interventions. The fieldwork took place during an early stage of the implementation of the parallel society legislation. Hence, one limitation of this study is that it does not include an analysis of the outcomes after the transformations were completed.

Using a thematic analysis, patterns of repetition were identified in the material by coding and relating it to relevant literature and theoretical concepts. Thereby, empirical findings emerged, along with theoretical concepts which enabled me to make sense of the findings.

Theoretical Approach: Encapsulative Bordering

Theoretically, this chapter builds on an understanding of the paradigm shift and the parallel society legislation as bordering practices that govern the mobility of racialised groups both locally and nationally. Bordering practices are here understood as attempts to remove migrants from the national territory (the repatriation strategy of the paradigm shift), removing migrants from their local homeplaces within the national territory (the relocation strategy of the parallel society legislation), and actions that exclude people from access to equal rights in society.

For my analysis, I have developed the concept of encapsulative bordering. This concept foregrounds the spatial dimension of internal bordering and enables me to underscore the contradictory consequences of the parallel society

legislation. By using this concept, I show how policies that claim to aim for integration are causing exclusion; they are creating spaces (within the nation-state) where special laws apply and people do not have the same rights as in the rest of Danish society.

Contemporary border studies have highlighted the dynamic dimensions of state borders. The concept of bordering points to how borders are socially constructed and practised at multiple levels and how migrants can be excluded through both externalised and internalised bordering practices (Persdotter et al. 2021). While externalised bordering seeks to exclude migrants already before they reach the national territory, e.g., through border management in third countries, internalised bordering happens through practices that exclude migrants within the nation-state. This takes place through detention and deportation as well as through more subtle measures that exclude migrants from labour protections, health care, and housing, for example. Previous research has shown how categorisations of people enable internal bordering practices and differential treatment and how borders can follow people around, control their mobility, and exclude them from access to rights in different spheres (Anderson et al. 2009; Mulinari 2021; van Baar 2016). However, bordering is not only about categorising people. Previous studies of the Danish ghetto policies, often building on Wacquant's notion of territorial stigmatisation, have highlighted the spatial aspect of governance; ghetto policies produce a "ghetto place" as a deviant and dangerous place and how this spatialisation justifies the politics of the exception (Olsen and Larsen 2023; Schultz Larsen 2011; Simonsen 2016; Stender 2018). The ghetto list is "a tool for governance producing these areas as spaces that can, and should, be intervened upon by the government" (Fallov and Birk 2022: 221).

The concept of encapsulative bordering emphasises the spatial dimension of internal bordering by underscoring the categorisation of places within the nation-state. My analysis shows how people (racialised groups) and places ("ghettos") are encapsulated and depicted as not being part

of—but are a threat to—Denmark through the formulation and implementation of ghetto policies. This encapsulation allows for spatially targeted interventions that function as bordering practices, excluding racialised and low-income groups from democratic influence, equal rights, and their communities at both a local and a national scale.

Analysis: Contradictory Consequences

The social mix interventions initiated through the parallel society legislation led to the opposite of the stated goals during their implementation. Interventions that aim to create increased safety, mixed neighbourhoods, and the integration of "non-Western immigrants" instead led to unsafety, increased spatial divides, and exclusion from equal rights, democracy, and community at both a local and a national scale. The analysis focuses on residents' experiences of the parallel society legislation's strategies for achieving social mix (and integration) through tenure diversification at a neighbourhood scale.

Deprived of Democratic Influence

My interviews with Mjølnerparken residents uncovered how residents felt deceived by the housing organisation and deprived of democratic influence. Ivan, a man in his 70s, expressed his frustration over the fact that the housing organisation hadn't immediately objected to the parallel society legislation but instead had allowed the politicians to launch the 2018 ghetto policy in Mjølnerparken's community house. He described how the politicians "[...] came out here and presented it, and on top of it all in our community house! I think it is extraordinary provoking. They come out here, not to talk *with* us, but *about* us" (Interview, November 2021). Another resident shared how they had been denied the opportunity to provide input on the redevelopment plan for how the neighbourhood should meet the requirements of the parallel society legislation, specifically for how to reduce the number of public housing units for families to 40 per cent.

The annual tenants' meeting voted almost unanimously that the housing units should be gradually converted into senior and youth housing, instead of being sold. But the housing organisation didn't even vote about that. They had decided to sell, [...] and this was decided upon without even presenting Mjølnerparken's suggestion. So, you can't really call it resident democracy.

– Interview with Emma, October 2021

The affected residents did not have a say in the redevelopment plans initiated through the parallel society legislation. Instead, the redevelopment plans were developed by the housing organisations in dialogue with the municipalities and were later approved by the Ministry of Housing. Although residents were allowed to express their opinions through a local vote, the legislation enabled housing organisations to override tenants' decisions and decide on plans for transformations without resident approval (Kjeldsen 2023: 89), thereby depriving residents of democratic influence.

The 2018 ghetto policy proclaimed to promote increased safety: "The Government wants a cohesive Denmark. A Denmark which is built upon democratic values of freedom and legal rights" (Regeringen 2018: 4). Paradoxically, the parallel society legislation functions as an encapsulative internal bordering practice which excludes residents from equal rights and democratic influence at a local scale. In addition, it generates unsafety among affected residents.

In Mjølnerparken, the lack of influence resulted in uncertainty and unsafety for affected residents, who were disempowered and were no longer in charge of their housing situation. Residents feared evictions, forced relocations, unaffordable rent levels in their future apartments, and loss of their social networks. A retired man described how:

A lot of people have moved out, because the housing organisation said that it would be a really good idea if people moved out. It made people unsafe about what would happen.

– Interview with Nicolai, November 2021

Another man, who had raised his three children in Mjølnerparken, said:

It is very depressing. My wife is in the hospital right now [...] she talks about it almost ten times a day.

– Interview with Ali, March 2022

As these quotes illustrate, the relocation process generated a large amount of confusion and uncertainty. The housing organisation could only offer rehousing within Mjølnerparken to the tenants with the highest seniority. Furthermore, under the parallel society legislation, the housing organisation was only obliged to make one offer of rehousing, and residents had no guarantee of similar rent levels, similar square metres, or where in the municipality the new apartment would be located. Many residents insisted on their right to be relocated within the neighbourhood, a right which is, somewhat paradoxically, stated in the parallel society legislation (Folketinget 2018: 5).

However, this right was bypassed by the housing organisation by referring to the relocations as part of the Master Plan and not the redevelopment plan based on the parallel society legislation. This uncertainty generated a "voluntary" out-migration from Mjølnerparken and a fear among residents that protesting could affect their housing situation negatively. Nevertheless, as discussed later in this chapter, many residents stayed and protested against the sale and the relocations.



Source: Photo taken by the author in August 2022.

Deprived of Local and National Communities

In addition to the exclusion from democratic influence described above, in practice, the parallel society legislation deprived residents of their local and national communities. On a local scale, residents were deprived of their sense of home in the neighbourhood even before relocation began. As Picture 1 illustrates, the extensive renovations, which were initiated in 2021 and conducted in all four courtyards simultaneously, made the neighbourhood inaccessible, unrecognisable, and unliveable, even though people still lived there.

The playgrounds were removed, along with all recreational spaces within and between the courtyards. The area was filled with construction supplies, fences, and deep holes in the ground. The community house was demolished in June 2022 without a sustainable plan for how to pro-

vide an equivalent common space for residents' private and common celebrations and meetings. These physical transformations disrupted residents' sense of home even before relocation. In addition to the physical transformation, the neighbourhood underwent a social transformation as many residents moved out. Social networks were scattered as people were relocated across the city. In Mjølnerparken, residents were subjected to the violence of un-homing; they were deprived of their local communities both physically, with relocation, and psychologically, as the neighbourhood was socially and materially transformed (Söderberg 2024).

In addition, the encapsulative bordering of the parallel society legislation means that affected residents are being deprived of their tenants' rights in Denmark. During interviews, residents described how they felt unfairly treated and discriminated against, as they had to fear eviction

simply due to their address. The 2018 amendment to the Danish Public Housing Act allows for public housing organisations to terminate the leases of tenants in public housing neighbourhoods designated as vulnerable housing areas and relocate the occupants before a sale is realised (Folketinget 2018: 5). Residents in neighbourhoods affected by the parallel society legislation thus have weaker protections against eviction than other tenants in Denmark, who have the right to remain in their apartments even if the housing block they live in is sold, as their lease is automatically transferred to the new owner (Lejeloven 2024). Vahid, a man who had lived in Mjølnerparken for 33 years, explained: “My situation is that I have been promised a lot of things, and then I find out that I will have to move out anyway [...] We have a permanent lease, but they don’t even acknowledge that. [...] They couldn’t care less” (Interview March 2022). In the name of integration, the parallel society legislation creates spaces within the national territory, where a different set of rules applies. Residents in the designated neighbourhoods are denied democratic influence and legal rights; a process of encapsulative bordering.

Nonetheless, the parallel society legislation breeds resistance. Many of Mjølnerparken’s residents have objected to the sale of the two buildings in their neighbourhood and the parallel society legislation more generally, claiming that it is discriminatory and causes violations of human rights. Assisted by human rights lawyers, 12 residents are filing a court case against the Ministry of Housing. They claim that the Ministry’s approval of the redevelopment plan is discriminatory and unlawful as it results in residents losing their homes due to the discriminatory aspects of the legislation; that the share of “non-Western immigrants and descendants” was the determining criterion for designating the neighbourhood a parallel society. Before this case is treated in the Danish court, the Court of Justice of the European Union in Luxemburg will determine whether the parallel society legislation’s use of the

“non-Western” criterion is discriminatory under the Race Equality Directive.⁴

The categorisation of racialised residents as “non-Western immigrants and descendants” and depiction of them as non-Danish and not belonging even though many of them were born in Denmark or have Danish citizenship is in itself an internal bordering practice, depriving people of the recognition of their national belonging. Asmaa, who was born in Denmark but whose parents are from the Middle East, expressed frustration and resignation when she talked about the lack of recognition:

I have this theory, that if I moved out of Mjølnerparken and if I took off my hijab, if I began to drink and party and eat pork. [...] If I did all of that, and I bleached my hair and wore blue contact lenses, I would still not be accepted! Some politicians would still be like “Yes, but you still have those Arabic roots”. I think that regardless of what I do, it would never be good enough, never ever.

— Interview, February 2022

As recognition of those around is crucial for our sense of belonging to be realised and complete (Erdal 2021), the portrayal of racialised residents and “ghettos” as not being a part of Denmark has consequences which are contradictory to the stated aims of the parallel society legislation; people with a migration background are deprived of the recognition of their national belonging. The parallel society legislation thus functions as an encapsulative bordering practice through which racialised and low-income groups are excluded from democratic influence, rights, and their communities at both a local and a national scale.

⁴ A hearing in the EU court took place in September 2024 and a court ruling is expected in 2025.

Two Banners on Balconies in Mjølnerparken



Note: "Stop etnisk udrensning" [Stop ethnic cleansing] (L) and "Jeg har ret til at bo her" [I have the right to live here] (R).
Source: Photo taken by the author in June 2022.

Measuring Mix: A Question of Scale

The parallel society legislation also has contradictory consequences related to its aim of generating a mixed resident composition. Mjølnerparken and other listed neighbourhoods are depicted as in need of interventions due to a presumed homogeneous resident composition of "non-Western immigrants". However, when residents were interviewed about how they perceive their neighbourhood, they described it as already being mixed. They highlighted the ethnic and socio-economic diversity within the neighbourhood and thereby challenged the narrative of Mjølnerparken as homogeneous. Through expressing their experiences, an alternative neighbourhood narrative is established. This narrative deconstructs the concept of "the non-Western" and highlights how the residents within this category are ethnically and socio-economically diverse (Söderberg 2024).

Furthermore, some residents emphasised that Mjølnerparken is geographically located within a mixed housing area. Within 500 meters from Mjølnerparken, there are buildings that are 21 per cent *ejerboliger* [owner-occupied housing], 38 per cent *andelsboliger* [private cooperatives], 25 per cent private rental, and 16 per cent public housing (Christensen et al. 2022a: 63). Thereby, if measured on a slightly larger scale, Mjølnerparken and its surroundings would be classified as already mixed. That the government is delimiting the measurement of resident composition to public housing neighbourhoods is an expression of encapsulative bordering. This enables them to depict places as "homogeneous" despite their internal heterogeneity and geographical location in areas of mixed tenure types. Encapsulation thus contributes to the justification of bordering practices, here meaning interventions which focus solely on increasing tenure mix within the designated neighbourhoods, thus leading

to privatisation of public housing and displacement of low-income and racialised residents.

Future evaluations of the outcomes of the interventions following the parallel society legislation will most probably show that Mjølnerparken has become more mixed. However, this will only be the case if measuring the resident composition on the same scale. If measured at a smaller scale, it will be visible how the neighbourhood has been divided rather than mixed. The reduction of the share of public housing family units to 40 per cent of the previous housing stock has been achieved by selling the two housing blocks in the middle (Picture 3).

Several residents described how the neighbourhood was becoming less mixed during the renovation. The residents with the highest seniority were rehoused within the remaining public

housing blocks, while many of the economically more advantaged residents who had moved in more recently had to (or chose to) leave the neighbourhood.

We can see from the voluntary relocations that more and more people are moving out because they need to find a permanent housing situation. And it could have been in Mjølnerparken, but because of the ghetto legislation, they are scared away. Thereby, the opposite outcome from what was the purpose has been achieved

— Interview with Niels, March 2022

Map of Mjølnerparken

Picture 3



Source: Bo-Vita and Juli Living 2023.

Hence, contradictory to the stated goal of increased mix, the resident composition was becoming less mixed during the renovations. After the sale and relocation of residents, and before new residents moved into the sold housing blocks, the proportion of residents who are “immigrants and descendants” in Mjølnerparken increased from 80.5 per cent in 2019 (Stender et al. 2022) to 86.7 per cent in 2023 (Social-, Bolig- og Ældreministeriet 2023). At the moment, there is a risk that a divide will emerge between the old Mjølnerparken and the two middle buildings, both in terms of tenure type and resident composition.

In the sold part of Mjølnerparken (which is now private rentals), incoming tenants must be employed or studying, and the rental rates have doubled. When measured on a smaller scale, the neighbourhood is rather becoming more divided than mixed, as the two sold housing blocks are reserved for high-income residents, while long-term tenants remain in the public housing blocks. Although it is still too early to predict the outcomes in terms of social interaction among new and old tenants in Mjølnerparken, previous research on the outcomes of social mix policies indicates that dividing neighbourhoods into buildings with different tenure

types does not lead to increased cross-class social interaction (Atkinson and Kintrea 2000; Davidson 2010). Instead, research suggests that mix tenure types on a lower scale (e.g. within a building) might lead to more social interaction (Jupp 1999). However, this is not the strategy applied to Mjølnerparken. The neighbourhood appears to be becoming more divided and less mixed through the interventions.

Conclusion

Based on empirical data generated through fieldwork in Mjølnerparken focused on residents' perspectives, this chapter has shown that the social mix interventions resulting from the parallel society legislation have thus far not had their intended effect. Interventions that aim for increased safety, mixed neighbourhoods, and integration of "non-Western immigrants" lead to unsafety, spatial divides, and exclusion from democratic influence and communities at both a local and a national scale. These processes are here conceptualised as encapsulative bordering practices, highlighting how the parallel society legislation is encapsulating public housing neighbourhoods and creating spaces where special rules apply, all in the name of integration. This encapsulation enables spatially and racially targeted interventions through which residents are physically and psychologically excised from their local communities and denied democratic influence. Furthermore, they are excluded from the national community by being deprived of their rights on the basis of where they live and through the non-recognition of their national belonging.

In addition, the analysis highlights the importance of scale when depicting places as mixed or segregated. Notably, this neighbourhood's resident composition would have been classified as already sufficiently mixed if the neighbourhood boundaries had been drawn slightly bigger. Moreover, the neighbourhood has so far become less mixed and more divided through the mandated transformation. The sale of two housing blocks following the passing of the parallel society legislation does not create a mixed resident

composition within housing blocks. Based on empirical findings from previous studies, it is unlikely that the transformation will lead to meaningful social interaction between tenants of the different housing blocks.

The findings indicate that the social mix strategies of parallel society legislation are counterproductive during their implementation. Policymakers need to reassess these strategies to avoid harming the people they claim to help. Policies should promote recognition and equal rights for all residents, regardless of migration background or postal address. Furthermore, processes of positive development initiated through *boligsocialt arbejde* [local community work] should not be overridden by top-down national policies that are closely tied to restrictive migration policies and internal bordering practices. Instead, those affected by the policies should be actively and democratically involved in defining the problem and the solution, as local needs can vary significantly between neighbourhoods. Lastly, the findings suggest that policy makers need to consider the immediate and far-reaching consequences of policy implementation, rather than focusing solely on statistically measurable outcomes at the neighbourhood level.

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The Paradigm Shift and Its Consequences on Immigration to Denmark

A Comparative Perspective

by Martin Bak Jørgensen

Introduction

I have never doubted that refugees distinguish between which welfare benefits they can get in different European countries, and the government has now put an end to the Danish gift shop.

— Minister of Integration Inger Støjberg in Berlingske (2018)

These are the very direct words the then-minister used to introduce the package of laws that would later come to be popularly known as the Danish “paradigm shift”—words which do not hide the speaker’s understanding of refugees as economically rational actors who choose their destination according to economic benefits, nor the aim to reduce the number of immigrants coming to Denmark without legitimate reasons.

The paradigm shift was proposed to the Danish Parliament in the following manner:

The agreement on the immigration area contains a new approach to immigration and integration with a focus on repatriation that sends a clear

signal that the residence of refugees in Denmark is temporary and that Denmark has both the will and the ability to act quickly and effectively when the basis for a residence permit is no longer present. The agreement significantly strengthens the possibility of withdrawing the residence permits of refugees and family reunified to refugees and sending them home as soon as possible.

— Folketinget (2019: 12); own translation

This short description captures most of the concepts and objectives underpinning the legal and policy package known as the paradigm shift. The text both emphasises the goal of temporary protection and cessation of protection status while indirectly shunting aside the objective of integration.

Even before 2019, immigrant and immigration-focused legislation had become increasingly restrictive, paving the way for this change. Almost two decades of pressure from electoral successful radical right parties, like the Danish People’s Party, served to normalise a very restrictive approach. This was further accentuated when the number of refugees in Europe increased in the autumn of 2015, which led Danish politicians and integration authorities to react in three ways.

Firstly, they introduced changes to the asylum and integration policy framework with the aim of discouraging new arrivals. The idea behind these changes was that if conditions for newly arrived asylum seekers were not welcoming, other potential asylum seekers might look elsewhere. Secondly, they developed new initiatives to promote faster integration into the labour market. These included, for example, a requirement for new asylum seekers to undergo a work trial within one month. Third, Danish authorities increased the number of integration initiatives from local actors in the municipalities.

These three categories of political initiatives blur the lines between deterrence (Suarez-Krabbe et al. 2018) and integration measures. Overall, the last two decades have left very little room to welcome refugees and migrants in Denmark. Even before 2015, refugees have been constructed as a particularly problematic group that has earned protection and welfare benefits solely because of their status and not due to their contributions to society (Jørgensen and Thomsen 2016).

The “refugee crisis” of 2015 created new tensions in the population between those who called for a more accommodating policy and those who called for more restrictions. Ultimately, the political winds led to policy measures that have made life more difficult for both refugees and migrants. It has become more difficult to obtain permanent residence and citizenship, and at the same time, the authorities have attached (on paper) great importance to deportation and repatriation. The latter has been further emphasised with the introduction of the paradigm shift, which is the focal point of this volume. The overall policy goal of the paradigm shift has been to create a migration regime deterring potential asylum seekers from applying for asylum in Denmark. However, the policy measures target potential future refugees as well as those who are already in Denmark, some of whom have been in Denmark for years. The refugee crisis was thus used to expand the category of deportable populations. Whereas this category previously included rejected asylum seekers and migrants residing in Denmark on a tolerated stay, the category now has been ex-

panded to include refugees who already had their claim for asylum accepted, who were reunited with their families and who are in paid employment, learning Danish and in most ways have embarked on a new life (Jørgensen 2020). Refugees can now have their protection status revoked if the Danish authorities determine that the situation in their country of origin has changed.

In this chapter, I discuss the consequences of the paradigm shift for (refugee) immigration to Denmark and bring in a Nordic comparative perspective to the analysis of its impacts. I first provide a contextual understanding of the paradigm shift. Next, I discuss the effects on the number of asylum applications and repatriations and follow up with a comparative perspective from the other Nordic countries. From there, I analyse how the paradigm shift can be seen as a response to pull factors and continue with some reflections on the possible effects the policy change may have on maintaining Denmark as an attractive destination for the much-wanted high-skilled migrant workers. I end the chapter with a short conclusion. The material for this chapter is drawn from policy documents, legal frameworks, statistics, commentary pieces from news outlets, academic work and scientific reports.

The Paradigm Shift in Context

The paradigm shift is discussed in detail in the chapter by Stinne Østergaard Poulsen. Here, I will briefly outline the overall framework and the increased emphasis on repatriation that Bill 140 entails. The radical right Danish People’s Party brought their “big wish”, a paradigm shift in immigration policy, to the finance bill negotiations in Autumn 2018. The bill was approved by the government (Liberal Party, Liberal Alliance, and the Conservative Party) with the support of the Danish People’s Party and the Social Democrats in February 2019 and came into force on March 1, 2019. The paradigm shift is, in short, a series of legislative changes aimed at putting an end to the alleged fact that nine out of ten refugees end up staying in Denmark permanently. The goal is to send refugees back once it is peaceful enough

in their country of origin. In this way, the law is similar to the previous measures introduced during the “refugee crisis”, in the sense that it is, to a large extent, intended to have a preventive effect. From a legal point of view, these legislative changes are difficult to manage and interpret, as “peaceful enough” in home countries is not a simple thing to define. It has subsequently been shown that Denmark’s assessment of whether a country of origin or certain areas therein are peaceful enough differs significantly from the assessments made by international organisations and other countries. The law stipulates that the main rule must be that the residence permit of refugees and family reunified persons is revoked or not extended whenever possible unless doing so would be in direct conflict with Denmark’s international obligation.

In addition to the withdrawal of the residence permit, the law contains a number of restrictions concerning family reunification, reporting obligations, entry bans and access to vote in local elections. “Now, the immigration policy is being further expanded with a number of significant initiatives to ensure that the temporary protection in Denmark does not become a permanent existence when the need for protection ceases” (Finansministeriet 2019: 25; own translation) and “rules and practices need to be adapted so that an asylum permit no longer has to be considered as an admission ticket to live in Denmark when you no longer have a need for protection” (Ibid: 26).

In concrete terms, this also means a further reduction in social benefits by DKK 2,000 per month (approximately 270 Euro). NGOs already point to the damaging effects of the previous benefit level and foresee increased and protracted levels of poverty (see again the chapter by Stinne Østergaard Poulsen). Here, too, it is difficult not to interpret the reduction as part of a deterrence campaign to reduce the number of new asylum seekers generally. The reduction in benefits is partly intended to discourage potential asylum seekers and perhaps to encourage refugees living here to return home; moreover, the reduction is also intended to encourage foreigners to enter the labour market. A further

initiative has been to change the name of the integration service to “repatriation service”. Integration has already been replaced by “departure and self-sufficiency” (*udrejse og selvforsørgelse*) as objectives of the framework.

On the one hand, the paradigm shift pits the idea of integration against the goal of greatly increasing the number of voluntary and involuntary repatriates. On the other hand, the new policies also contain remnants of an earlier integration ideology focused on integration through the labour market. However, the main purpose of the law is to promote repatriation. In connection with the adoption of the law, the then Minister for Immigration and Integration Inger Støjberg stated that:

We simply need more refugees to return when they no longer need our protection [...]. It is unsustainable if we have to both protect those who need our protection but also have to keep those who no longer need our protection. Then, of course, you have to go home and rebuild your country.

– TV2 (2019)

Mattias Tesfaye, the speaker of the Social Democratic Party at the time, supported and commented on the adoption as primarily a communicative shift: “People are met with a more honest message that it is a temporary stay they must have in Denmark” (Ibid.).

In sum, the new restrictions make temporariness the central theme of the policy framework. Refugees, regardless of their achievements and length of residency in Denmark, are expected to leave the country. In consequence, integration (as it is portrayed in the Finance Bill) is basically not possible, and refugees remain a deportable population. De Genova argues that “within any given regime of immigration-related conditionalities [...] and contingencies, migrants always remain more or less deportable” and describes this as an

“economy’ of deportability: even if all non-citizens are potentially subject to deportation, not everyone is deported, and not everyone is subject to deportation to the same degree” (2013: 2).

Additionally, the “motivational enhancement measures” target rejected asylum-seekers who cannot be deported as well as immigrants living in Denmark on “tolerated stay” (i.e., immigrants with a criminal record and/or a deportation order which cannot be executed because their country of origin is not safe or does not receive them; see Suarez-Krabbe et al. 2018). People on “tolerated stay” live in the Kærshovedgaard and Sjælsmark deportation centres, where conditions are extremely harsh, and people have little possibility of living an autonomous life. The immigrants living there receive only a minimal allowance, are not allowed to cook for themselves, have to register their whereabouts, etc.

At first glance, these provisions seem to have the desired effect in the eyes of the government. That is to say, the conditions of a “tolerated stay” are unbearable for some residents. In 2021, of the 653 people who left the deportation centre Kærshovedgaard during the centre’s first three years of existence, 74 had either departed voluntarily or been deported, 78 had received residence permits through another protection status, and 419 simply disappeared and were listed as “absent” (Bendixen 2021). While such disappearances may pose a security threat or be taken as a sign that the government is unable to achieve the desired control of the unwanted population, they have been used to explain the government’s ultimate desire to expel refugees without breaking the Geneva Convention. When interrogated about the disappearances, Inger Støjberg responded: “The idea is of course that they have to go home to the country they came from. But I have always been aware that some are trying [to get asylum] in other countries” and the Danish People’s Party’s spokesperson on integration gave a similar response: “This is a small success. Understood in the sense that they leave and travel to another European country and stay there rather than stay in Denmark. So in this way it is of course good” (TV2 2019).

Effects on the Number of Asylum Applications and Repatriations

How has the paradigm shift then impacted the number of asylum seekers and repatriations? During the long summer of migration in 2015, the number of persons applying for asylum in Denmark peaked at 20,970 in a year (of which 9,995 persons received a first-instance positive decision on their applications). The year after, the number dropped to 6,195 asylum-seekers. In 2017 and 2018, this dropped again to between 3,200 and 3,600. In 2019, the year when the paradigm shift went into effect, 2,740 people applied. In 2020, the number fell to a new low of 1,490 applicants. This drop, however, can be explained by the COVID-19 travel restrictions. Accordingly, the numbers increased again in the following years to 2,100 in 2021, 4,595 in 2022, and 2,480 in 2023 (Nordic Statistics 2024). The numbers challenge the assumption that the paradigm shift itself has reduced the number of people applying for asylum. Notably, the increase in the 2022 figure is because 2,020 Ukrainians received temporary protection that year. However, the number of asylum seekers overall has increased since 2019 and is only slightly lower than in 2017 and 2018, given the fact the European countries overall saw a decrease in numbers.

When it comes to repatriation, it is even more difficult to assess how the paradigm shift may have had an effect. The number of repatriations has fluctuated since the implementation of the paradigm shift but has not increased significantly. Data from the Danish Refugee Council indicates that Syrians are the most common nationality repatriating, with an increase from close to 0 in 2018 to around 150 in 2021 (DRC 2021). In 2022, a total number of 315 people were repatriated; only 51 of those were Syrians, despite being the main target group (DRC 2022). Syrian refugees often have their protection status revoked, making them deportable, but not necessarily deported.

The paradigm shift opened the door for two additional law packages. All repatriations are

effectuated under the *Repatrieringsloven* [The Repatriation Act] (LBK nr 1023 af 02/10/2019). In 2021, the *Hjemrejseloven* [The Return Act] (LOV nr 982 af 26/05/2021) added further layers to this legal apparatus. The focus of this law is to effectively “motivate” people who formerly held a protection status but are no longer considered to have legal residence to leave the country. There is no hard evidence to show that this is an efficient tool to this end. In 2022, seven people were returned, of whom three were Syrian (DRC 2022). In 2023, five people were returned under this law, three of whom were Syrian (DRC 2023). In the first four months of 2024, four people were returned under the law (DRC 2024). Many have been forced into deportation centres, so the choice of repatriation could also be a “last resort”. The contributions in Rytter et al.’s (2023) book offer various analyses of this situation. Their overall conclusion is that the paradigm shift has created insecurity and precarity and has not proven to be a just or effective policy tool.

Nordic and European Comparisons

In October 2023, Ministers from Sweden, Finland, Norway, Iceland, and Denmark met in Copenhagen for the first of three planned initiatives to increase collaboration between migration attachés responsible for deportation (Agence France Presse 2023). Their plans included a stronger institutional framework to strengthen cooperation with third countries to better carry out deportations. Secondly, they discussed the common aim of joint flights from the Nordic countries to a third country. Thirdly, they wanted to increase support for stranded irregular migrants in North Africa through assisted voluntary return to their own countries as part of the underlying aim of preventing potential asylum-seekers from coming to Europe generally and the Nordic countries in particular. Danish Immigration and Integration Minister Kaare Dybvad Bek from the Social Democrats spoke for all the Nordic Ministers when he said that the countries shared “a common interest in ensuring that foreigners without legal residence are sent home”

and stated that “we must prevent them from travelling across our countries and slipping under the radar of the authorities” (Ibid.). This statement aligns well with the Danish Social Democrat objective of “zero refugees”, as stated by Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen (TV2 2021).

Like Denmark, other Nordic countries also became somewhat more restrictive in their immigration policies over time; however, they did not introduce ultra-restrictive law packages comparable to the Danish paradigm shift. Drawing on data from Nordic Statistics, Sweden has received more asylum-seekers both numerically and proportionally to population than most EU member states, including the other Nordic countries. In 2015, 162,550 people applied for asylum in Sweden. Of these approximately 51,300 were Syrians and 41,400 from Afghanistan. In Sweden, the number of asylum-seekers decreased in the years that followed to 28,860 in 2016 and 26,370 in 2017. Interesting are the trends in asylum applications in Sweden from 2019 and onwards; 26,285 applied in 2019, followed by a drop to 16,620 in 2020. The next two years, 2021 and 2022, saw 20,420 and 23,845 applications, respectively. In Sweden, a larger number of Ukrainian asylum-seekers explains the increase in 2022. In 2023, applications decreased to 17,040, which is the lowest in many years.

Numbers from Norway show a peak in asylum applications in 2015 at 31,145, followed by a sharp decline in the subsequent years to 3,520 in 2016 and 3,560 in 2017. By 2019, 2,305 people applied for asylum, and the number further decreased to 1,395 in 2020, before slightly rising to 1,660 in 2021. In 2022, applications rose above pre-pandemic levels, reaching 4,840, and continued to increase to 5,360 in 2023. Compared with Denmark and Sweden, the increase in 2022 is not entirely explained by a larger number of Ukrainian applicants, as this group is smaller than in the two other countries. Instead, we see an increase in Syrian asylum seekers in Norway. The numbers in Finland are numerically close to Norway’s data, with an increase in 2022 due to 1,800 asylum-seekers from Ukraine.

Asylum Applicants and First Instance Positive Decisions on Applications by Reporting Country

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Denmark	20,970	6,195	3,235	3,600	2,740	1,490	2,100	4,595	2,480
Finland	32,345	5,625	5,020	4,515	4,535	3,205	2,540	5,805	5,355
Norway	31,145	3,520	3,560	2,685	2,305	1,395	1,660	4,840	5,350
Sweden	162,550	28,860	26,370	21,600	26,285	16,260	20,420	23,845	17,040

Source: Nordic Statistics (2024).

None of the three other countries introduced a Danish-style paradigm shift, but their tendencies are remarkably alike. All experienced a drop in 2020 that can be explained by the COVID-19 travel restrictions. Finland and Norway both have a comparable population size to Denmark, but both receive a higher number of asylum seekers than Denmark does. This tendency goes further back than the introduction of the paradigm shift, and a deeper analysis drawing on a longer timeframe would provide interesting insight. From the numbers themselves, there is little evidence that the paradigm shift has led to significantly lower rates of asylum seekers in Denmark. Figure 1 shows the relative numbers over time and confirms the impression given by the development of the absolute numbers. Despite its more restrictive asylum and integration legislation, Denmark does not stand out in the broader Nordic comparison. Instead, it follows the same general trend as its neighbours.

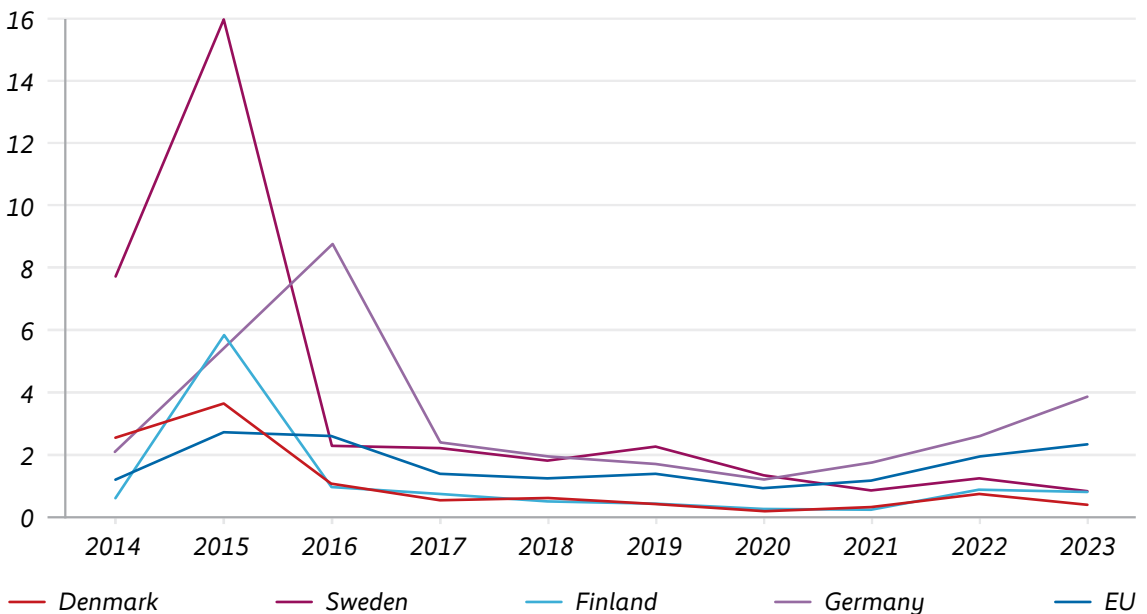
When it comes to repatriation, a comparison between the Nordic countries shows that Sweden makes very limited use of the repatriation support scheme. In 2022, 33 people applied for repatriation support and only two were granted assistance (Migrationsverket 2023). Regarding general returns, 11,580 cases were registered in 2022. Of these, 4,409 individuals voluntarily left the

country – 3,723 departed in accordance with their decision and left the Schengen Zone, while the rest travelled to another country within the Schengen Zone. Moreover, the total number of registered return cases declined over the past few years; in 2020, 18,523 cases were registered, while in 2021, 13,782 were registered (Ibid.). In 2023, the Swedish government strengthened its efforts to enforce returns. Individuals whose applications for residence permits are rejected and who are not entitled to reside in Sweden on other grounds must leave the country. To pursue this goal, the Swedish Migration Agency, the Swedish Police, and the Swedish Tax Agency have been given an enhanced mandate to collaborate (Government of Sweden 2023).

Norway also has an assisted return or repatriation program that offers financial support to those wanting to return to their home countries. Like in Sweden, fewer assisted returns took place in 2022 (89) compared to 2021 (127) (UDI 2022). The number increased to 156 in 2023 (UDI 2023). All these persons had previously received a final rejection of their application for protection. In Norway, a larger number of people are classified as deportable: 4,000 in 2022 and 5,600 in 2023 (Ibid.). Norway deported 2,319 individuals without legal residence in 2023, slightly down from 2,695 in 2022 (Kryeziu 2023).

Number of New Asylum Applications per 1,000 Inhabitants

Figure 1



Source: Eurostat (2024).

Comparing Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, it is difficult to see the paradigm shift having a big impact on either repatriation or deportation rates. In pure numbers, Sweden deports many more people than the two other countries. Of course, Sweden also receives a much larger number of asylum seekers and thereby ends up with more people receiving a final rejection decision. The main difference between the countries is rather that all refugees (asylum seekers offered protection) are at risk of losing their status and became deportable under the new Danish law. Deportability, regardless of whether it is effectuated or not, has become a constitutive element of the Danish immigration framework.

In this context, the Danish Immigration Service controversially declared the Damascus and Rif areas of Syria “safe” in March 2021 and two additional government-controlled areas, Tartous and Latakia, in March 2023. As a result, refugees from these four areas have had their protection status revoked and overnight became deportable and placed in deportation centres

(Jørgensen 2023). Cessation of protection status has also been possible in Norway since 2015, and Sweden may join the trend in the near future. While Denmark is the most restrictive country in terms of precarious protection and revoking protection status, some scholars argue that temporary asylum protection may become a new norm in Nordic countries overall (Vedsted-Hansen et al. 2020).

However, making people deportable does not mean that deportation will take place. In Denmark, there have been numerous decisions on the revocation of asylum permits for Somalis, and yet very few of these have led to actual deportation (Ibid.). The same can be found in Norway. Between 2018 and 2022, only 142 Somalis were deported (forcibly returned) from Norway. “Project Damaskus” has similarly not had any success in terms of making Syrians from the four targeted areas leave Denmark; 2,155 cases were reassessed between February 2019 and May 2023. Of these, 371 statuses were revoked. However, it has been impossible for these peo-

ple to be deported due to the fact that Denmark does not have a diplomatic relationship with Syria and no means to enforce those returns in practice (Udlændinge- og Integrationsministeriet 2023). The result is that Syrians remain rightless and stuck in Denmark, often in closed detention centres.

The Paradigm Shift as a Response to Pull Factors

The understanding of Denmark as an attractive country for immigrants has been popular in the political discourse in Denmark. The quote from Inger Støjberg at the beginning of the chapter is a recent reflection of the long history of the politicised understanding of Denmark being a “magnet” for migrants. In the first decade of the 2000s, a popular narrative from both sides of the political spectrum was that of the “welfare scrounger”. This narrative indicates that the seemingly generous and inclusive Danish welfare benefits and services serve as pull factors for migrants looking for better opportunities. This group included asylum-seekers as well as low-skilled migrant workers. Labour migrants from Eastern European countries, for instance, were demeaned as “scroungers” by various politicians.

For example, Villy Søvndal from the Socialistik Folkeparti [Socialist People’s Party; Green Left] (SF) expressed: “They don’t have the right to scrounge just because they are from Eastern Europe” (quoted in Jakobsen 2008; own translation). This style of discourse implies people abuse their right as EU citizens to access welfare services. The welfare scrounger narrative is used in relation to the debates of changing the social welfare system from a universalistic model based on equal rights to a system based on differentiated rights that have to be earned. Many policy actions shifting this system towards the differentiated rights model have already been introduced over the years (e.g., the accumulation principle for pension) (Jørgensen and Thomsen 2018). The “real” deserving and dependent target group in this narrative are needy Danes, e.g., pension-

ers and hard-working labourers. The right-wing parties have tended to somehow make scrounging an all-encompassing characteristic that undermines any narrative representing migrants in positive terms.

The centre-left parties oppositely sought to maintain a distinction between deserving and undeserving migrants within the narrative, as illustrated by the Social Democrats’ statement back in 2015:

We will demand that unemployed foreigners who have only been in the Danish labour market for a short time or have poor Danish language skills should participate in Danish language courses and meet up frequently at the job centre. And, we will strengthen control of the residence requirement so that we ensure that the unemployed who receive benefits in Denmark actually reside in Denmark and are staying here.

— Socialdemokraterne (2015); own translation

The welfare scrounger narrative connects to a narrative of social dumping most often articulated by labour unions, interest organisations, and political parties to both left and right. Attitudes towards low-skilled migrant workers have changed more drastically than those towards high-skilled workers since the financial crisis in 2008 and 2009 (Jørgensen and Thomsen 2012). Low-skilled workers are increasingly accused of social dumping and stealing jobs from Danish workers. The social dumping narrative has been particularly fuelled by accelerated migration from Eastern European EU countries and the economic crisis, which has led to increased unemployment. Eastern European workers were often seen as competitors who were mainly out for their own personal gain rather than contributing to Danish society.

These narratives address the concept of pull factors for migration and portray both labour migrants and asylum-seekers as rational economic actors whose actions can be understood by neo-classical economic theory, namely the idea of push-pull factors as proposed by George Borjas (1999), among others. Borjas coined a hypothesis claiming that generous welfare states function as “welfare magnets” providing migratory push-pull factors. In this way, asylum-seekers are presented as rational beings doing a cost-benefit analysis of where to go, which very often will point their arrows towards Denmark and the Nordic countries in general. This understanding de-legitimises refugees as deserving and in genuine need but instead as “voluntary economic migrants” (Rask 2023). The solution to this is to make the pull factor less strong through deterrence measures, as discussed earlier in the chapter.

The effects of restrictive migration policies are not pointing only in one direction. The Determinants of International Migration: A Theoretical and Empirical Assessment of Policy, Origin and Destination Effects (DEMIG project) is a large, multi-faceted research project whose data show the complexity between restrictions, mobilities, and intended and unintended effects (DEMIG POLICY 2024). The project tracked more than 6,500 migration policy changes enacted by 45 countries around the world, mostly in the period between 1945 and 2013. The project demonstrates that restrictive policies reduce immigration but simultaneously disrupt migrants’ return trajectories. For example, such policies may prevent migrants from sending remittances home, which could otherwise facilitate their return and reduce the need for other family or community members to migrate via established migratory networks. Instead, these policies push people toward permanent settlement. Likewise, restrictions can cause migrants to find new routes and thus create new forms of irregularity. The very rich literature on transnational networks also provides evidence that social ties, established networks, and forms of social capital are much more influential in deciding where people on the move

end up than welfare benefits and pension schemes (e.g., Carling, 2008; Faist, 2000). This is also the conclusion of a more recent study by James and Mayblin (2016) focused explicitly on asylum seekers. In a comprehensive review of existing studies, they found that states themselves have little influence on the attractiveness of their country. They conclude that pull factors drawing asylum seekers to destination countries are much less often related to public policies than to factors such as the presence of social networks and histories of colonialism. Networks in the destination countries are shown to be the most relevant pull factor, while deterrent measures such as work bans have little impact on asylum flows (see also Di Iasio and Wahba 2024).

In the Danish case, proponents of restrictive policy measures argue that fewer income benefits for refugees have the double effect of discouraging refugees from seeking asylum in Denmark, i.e., a preventive objective, and improving employment rates for those who are granted asylum in Denmark, i.e. an integration objective; however, as Bredgaard and Ravn reiterate, “evidence supporting either of the claims is limited” (2021: 79; see also Andersen et al. 2019).

The fact remains that most immigrants coming to Denmark are not asylum seekers but come from other European countries. In 2022, 126,000 people came to Denmark to work and study, of whom only 2,100 came seeking asylum (Udlændingestyrelsen 2023). Asylum seekers constitute a very small minority of the total number, indeed just 1.65 per cent. In 2021, the group amounted to roughly 3.1 per cent (Udlændingestyrelsen, 2019). Looking back to 2018, before the paradigm shift was implemented, the proportion of asylum-seekers was close to 4.2 per cent (Udlændingestyrelsen 2019). Although at first glance, it could be argued that this decline from 2018 to 2022 could be ascribed as an impact of the paradigm shift, the total number of immigrants coming to Denmark was larger in 2022 than it was in 2018, whereas the number of asylum seekers has not changed significantly in a broader comparison (as elaborated above).

Restrictive Approach as Detrimental to Attracting the “Best and Brightest”?

The legislative amendments of the paradigm shift have caused a fundamental change to Danish integration ideals and practices. The focus on temporary instead of permanent residence permits and repatriation rather than integration of refugees reconfigures the image of the migrant in Denmark. Before this shift, the policy framework had incentive structures that would “reward” refugees who showed an ability and willingness to integrate into Danish society by making them more likely to receive permanent residence permits (Bredgaard and Ravn 2021). In evaluating if this new policy turn also has detrimental effects in attracting the kind of migrants that the Danish authorities would like to have in Denmark on a short-term or long-term basis, the increase in labour migration indicates that this does not seem to be the case. The number of work and residence permits issued to foreign workers in Denmark has increased in recent years.

By the end of 2022, one in eight employees in Denmark was a foreigner, up from one in fifteen ten years ago. Despite the politicised debate about the attractiveness and value of foreign skilled workers in Denmark, their numbers have only increased. The Danish People’s Party has consistently argued that foreign workers undermine social cohesion, but the general attitude towards foreign workers is positive. The *Dansk Erhverv* [Danish Chamber of Commerce] estimates that Denmark will need 130,000 foreign workers in 2033 (Dansk Erhverv 2023). As a result, the attractiveness of Denmark for foreign workers is given political attention. There are few, if any, analyses of the effects of the paradigm shift on the attractiveness of Denmark for foreign workers. Given that the number of work permits issued for labour migration to Denmark is increasing, it is possible to draw the conclusion that the restrictions for asylum seekers have not impeded labour migration.

Data from the Expat Insider Survey suggest that expats (defined here as mostly high-skilled foreign workers) find working conditions and sala-

ries in Denmark attractive (InterNations 2024). However, Denmark, at the same time, scores very low on “the ease of settling in index”; the country is ranked 45th out of 53 countries (Ibid.). Expats here struggle with the (perceived) unfriendliness of the population, find it hard to make local friends, and do not feel welcome. Denmark is not doing worse than the other Nordic countries, so it is difficult to conclude whether or not the paradigm shift has had an effect on this.

Foreign media’s coverage of the paradigm shift has mainly covered the challenges facing refugees whose residence permits have been revoked, the emphasis on temporary protection in Danish legislation, and the insecurities experienced by refugees as a result. The groups facing these challenges usually have different nationalities than the foreign workforce applying for work permits through the Danish labour market schemes for foreign workers. This makes it difficult to identify any correlations between these legal frameworks and their effects. Conclusions can only be speculative. For some groups and occupations, Denmark seems to be an attractive place to live and work. The increase in Indian engineers, for instance, is noticeable. It is doubtful that such an increase is influenced positively or negatively by the paradigm shift, however.

Even though there is little evidence for or against the paradigm shift being detrimental to attracting a skilled labour force, the policy change has sparked extensive debate and criticism, not least from trade unions, employer associations, and humanitarian organisations (Bredgaard and Ravn 2021). Employer associations and trade unions have criticised the law for being harmful to labour market integration and reducing labour supply in an economy with labour shortages. Employers’ associations have further argued that employers would be reluctant to recruit and invest in refugees at risk of repatriation (Ibid.). Denmark has a complex stratified system with 11 different categories and entry points for obtaining residence for work-related purposes. The Danish policy framework combines employment criteria, taking into account the tensions in the relevant

sectors of activity, with a salary level criterion aimed at prioritising highly skilled workers. In 2022, companies and trade unions complained that these constraints were too restrictive, especially in the context of labour shortages following the pandemic recovery (Delage et al. 2023). This critique is still present. In 2024, the biggest Danish company, Novo Nordisk, was very articulate about the company's frustration in getting work permits approved for foreign workers (Marketwire 2024).

Conclusion: Hardliner Approaches May Come with a Cost

Danish immigration policy has in recent years been characterised by a consensus politics. Contrary to studies emphasising the role of populist radical right parties (the Danish People's Party and others), my claim is that we now find a decreasing level of contestation among the political parties and increasing support for a very restrictive immigration policy in the political mainstream. This is very visible in the support for the paradigm shift legislation (L 140). Although it was proposed by a Liberal/Conservative government with strong encouragement from the Danish People's Party, the support from the Social Democrats was equally strong, and the proposal in many ways resonates with their immigration policy program launched in 2018 titled *Retfærdig og realistisk. En udlændingepolitik der samler Danmark* [Fair and Realistic: A Policy on Foreigners Which Unites Denmark] (Agustín and Jørgensen 2019). The Social Democrats situate themselves in the new political reality as the party sees it, stating that "there is a limit to how many foreigners can be integrated in Denmark" (Socialdemokratiet 2018; own translation). After reclaiming power in 2019, first with a minority government, and in 2022 in a centrist coalition government still in power in October 2024, the Social Democratic politics on immigration is no longer distinguishable from, for instance, the Danish People's Party. The proposals coming from the Social Democrats have been even more restrictive than proposals and policy changes decided by governments before 2019. A key idea,

for instance, is to pursue a UK-style externalisation of asylum policy through a unilateral agreement (or now within the EU) with Rwanda (Jørgensen 2023). The situation in Danish politics right now evokes a parallel to what Tariq Ali has termed "the extreme centre" (2015)—a party political situation with no "real" political opposition.

The politicisation of who can hold the right to stay in Denmark has created enormous insecurity. The government has described the new policy approach as a potential solution to the refugee issue outside of the EU's (or at least Denmark's) external borders while stressing temporality as a key factor. The foundation for restrictive policies continues to be the assumption that Denmark needs to be made less attractive to those wishing to re-establish their lives within its borders. The paradigm shift has been the main tool to meet this goal. The question remains whether or not it is effective in achieving its aims and what the costs might be in the short term and in the long run.

Some of the built-in mechanisms of the paradigm shift have not turned out to be efficient. Although Danish authorities did revoke the protection status of Syrian refugees living in Denmark, it has, in practice, not been possible to deport these people or make them return on a voluntary basis. Danish authorities acknowledge that there would not be forcible returns to Syria in light of foreign policy considerations: "A unilateral Danish policy on forcible returns to Syria could be taken as a legitimization of the Syrian regime" (quoted from Wijnkoop et al. 2024: 32). All groups targeted by the paradigm shift, Syrian refugees included, live in a legal limbo (see also the chapter by Stinne Østergaard Poulsen in this book), with no durable solution or perspective of building up their lives again in sight. The Danish position has faced a lot of critique from both other EU member-states but also national NGOs. For instance, the Danish Refugee Council and Danish Social Workers Union argued that the shift to repatriation creates an almost permanent state of uncertainty for refugees that can have severe negative social and psychological consequences (Bredgaard and Ravn 2021).

As I have shown throughout this chapter, it is not easy to detect the immediate successes of the paradigm shift in terms of meeting the goals of reducing the number of asylum seekers and increasing the number of repatriations and returns. Yes, the number of asylum-seekers has dropped; however, this is in line with trends in countries that have not introduced similar legislative packages. The Danish numbers are in line with a larger European trend. Likewise, it is difficult to identify a substantial increase in the number of people repatriating or leaving the country by force. If a high number of deported persons is a goal, then other countries without a paradigm shift have been more successful (Jørgensen 2023).

As I have written about in a recent publication (Ibid.), it proves difficult to find the economic argument for deportation anywhere. In the UK, figures from 2020 revealed by the UK Home Office show that enormous resources are being spent on very few deportees. Between October and December 2020, the Home Office spent 4.3 million British pounds deporting 322 people on 23 charter flights, which amounted to 13,354 British pounds per deportee (Taylor 2021). In Germany, using so-called mini charter flights for deportation has proven to be extremely costly. According to the government, German authorities deported 35 persons during the first six months of 2022 with this method (Jørgensen 2023). The flights required a total of 167 police officers on duty and came with a total cost of 580,000 Euro (Bathke 2022). This amounts to over 100,000 Euro per flight for one or two deportees (Ibid.).

The lack of evident data supporting the efficiency of the paradigm shift begs the question: Why is this a necessary or even desirable approach to pursue? We now know that the uncertainties caused by the shift are real, and the Danish authorities themselves have admitted that it is not possible to achieve the hoped-for returns. The question also arises as to whether this is a morally just approach. The Danish asylum system is robust—due to a rather low number of asylum seekers, obviously. There is no real backlog of asylum cases, including the appeal cases, and

the capacity to handle all issues pertaining to accommodating asylum seekers by all means appears to be solid. This policy may paradoxically have increased the number of people living irregularly in Denmark, as the data clearly points to a large number of persons having disappeared from the deportation centres (cf. Bendixen 2021). Authorities assume that they have left the country and thereby have become another country's "problem", but in reality, we do not know where they are.

Therefore, the main objective of the paradigm shift may not be the legislation itself but the powerful ideological message it sends to the rest of the world: Denmark is not a country for refugees. Or, in the words of the Social Democratic Prime Minister: "The goal is zero refugees to Denmark" (TV2 2021). New ideas are on the drawing table to reach this goal, such as the potential agreement with Rwanda to externalise Danish asylum processes and responsibilities. This has proved to be a very difficult plan to implement, so it is now being attempted within the EU framework. Regardless of the angle we look at it from, it appears doubtful that Denmark will ever reach the Prime Minister's goal. Nevertheless, with relatively few asylum seekers coming to the country, it is difficult to see why that would be a problem. Conversely, we do know that the policy framework comes with a direct cost for the affected target groups. We also know that Denmark has an ageing population, a historically low unemployment rate, and a need to attract a foreign workforce. Although there is no evidence that the paradigm shift is detrimental to this goal, it is fair to speculate that the hardline approach could end up sending signals to other immigrant groups that they are not welcome, and we already know that the country is losing both existing and potential workers by revoking residence permits of those already working or studying.

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The Populist Radical Right's Influence on Politics

Boon or Bane for Mainstream Political Parties?

by Susi Meret

Introduction

For over two decades, the *Dansk Folkeparti* (Danish People's Party, DF) has served as a textbook example of a successful and influential populist radical right party in Western Europe. The party has demonstrated sustained electoral growth and political influence, offering a model for other populist radical right parties across Europe since the turn of the century. The DF's "winning formula" (Kitschelt 1997) combines nativism and welfare chauvinism with appeals to the heartland (Taggart 2000) and nostalgia (Elgenius and Rydgren 2022; Betz and Meret 2012). This strategy has empowered the party's transition from the political margins to the mainstream. In response, the established parties across the political spectrum have struggled over the years to find ways that could help mitigate the DF electoral appeal. These strategies have evolved since the beginning of the 2000s, shifting from initial isolation and dismissal to involvement, adaptation, and even co-optation (Meret 2021). Such containment efforts accompanied by epochal events have led to noticeable shifts in mainstream parties' positions over time, particularly on migration, asylum, and integration, influencing both the political and public discourse. What once seemed extreme in discussions on asylum and migration, particularly concerning migrants from Muslim countries, has gradually become normalised in public opinion.

The following sections explore two interconnected questions related to the impact of the popu-

list and nativist right on the established mainstream parties. Firstly, I look at the normalisation of populist radical right positions within the mainstream right- and left-wing in the years from 2000 to 2022. I then analyse the impact of the right-wing shift on party electoral support, especially in the light of more recent political developments, including the formation of a broad centrist government coalition in 2022 comprised of *Socialdemokraterne* (Social Democrats), the *Venstre* (Liberals, V), and the *Moderaterne* (Moderates).

Legitimisation and Cooperation: "If You Can't Beat Them, Join Them"?

The maxim "If you can't beat them, join them" is typically used in politics to describe a pragmatic and opportunistic piece of advice: join forces with your opponent if they are too strong to be defeated (Bale et al. 2024). The expression describes the political manoeuvring in the 2001 Danish general election when the Liberal-Conservative minority government was made possible by the support of the DF. This strategy not only facilitated the formation of a right-wing coalition after almost a decade of centre-left rule, but it also gave political legitimacy to the Danish People's Party, which had previously been isolated. Comparative studies (see, e.g., Downs 2002; Bale 2003; Albertazzi and Vampa 2021) observe how this strategic shift by mainstream right-wing parties has already occurred in other contexts, such as Austria in 1999 and Italy in 1994 and

2001 (see also Meret 2010). While the Danish right-wing parties, the Liberals and the *Konservative Folkeparti* (Conservative People's Party, KF), could benefit from gaining electoral support from the radical right, this strategy also legitimised the populist radical right and maximised its electoral impact by turning previously marginalised and ineffective votes into influential ones.

Two structural factors facilitated these developments in Denmark. First, immigration concerns had already mobilised a significant segment of the electorate in favour of tighter immigration policies and stricter regulations (Bjørklund and Andersen 2002). Second, the alliance between the *Det Radikale Venstre* (Social Liberals) and the Social Democrats made it increasingly unlikely that the Social Liberals would rejoin the right-wing parties to form alternative right-wing coalitions. This alliance widened the gap between the centre-left mainstream and the centre-right factions, isolating the Liberals in particular from the Social Liberals, who had played a key role in forming centre-right and left-wing governments, as in 1982 and 1993 (Skjæveland 2003), although the Social Liberals' coalitional strength should not be overestimated (see Green-Pedersen 2003).

In response to these developments, the Liberals and the Conservative People's Party formed a partnership with the DF in order to secure the necessary parliamentary support. However, this alliance required a shift towards some of the radical right's positions, especially in the areas of migration and integration (Green-Pedersen and Krogstrup 2008). These issues were central to the DF agenda and the party systematically pushed for stricter immigration rules, less welfare for newcomers, and restricted access to Danish citizenship (see Dansk Folkeparti 1997).

Rise and Decline of the Danish People's Party

The legitimisation of the DF after the 2001 election highlights the challenges of maintaining early efforts to isolate and exclude the party from political influence, especially after the

centre-right's decision to give the party the role of supporting the minority cabinet. This development had significant repercussions for the mainstream right: the DF gained considerable political influence in the years to come, benefiting from its role of supporting the minority government. In order to become "coalitionable" and politically acceptable, the DF underwent several organisational and internal changes. The party wanted to project an image of respectability, trustworthiness, and reliability, while at the same time securing political achievements in some of the party's key areas: migration, integration, and citizenship rights. To maintain unity and prevent internal discord, the party leadership enforced strict top-down discipline, including the immediate expulsion of members deemed too radical or disobedient to leadership decisions (Meret 2015).

By exploiting its role in supporting the minority cabinet government, the DF maintained a significant degree of political autonomy from the two coalition parties (V and KF). The fact that the party held no ministerial positions and was not directly involved in the government allowed it to maintain a critical stance against the establishment and conventional (status quo) politics. In fact, unlike other populist radical right parties across Europe, the DF was never directly involved in government (Meret 2021). This, it can be argued, was in response to a deliberate party strategy already defined in the party's 1997 manifesto, which reads:

It is important for the Danish People's Party that the party can play an active role in parliamentary life. Therefore, the party's mandates must be reliably counted when political agreements are made. ... Thus, it is the Danish People's Party's wish to achieve political results through collaboration with other parties. ... The Danish People's Party, therefore, sees it as its goal to implement as much of its policy as possible.

— Dansk Folkeparti (1997), own translation

It turned out to be a point of strength. The DF learned how to take advantage of crucial decision-making moments, such as the negotiations with the government for the approval of the annual financial budget law. During these negotiations, the DF intensified its pressure and demands on the parties in the government in order to obtain concrete political results that could be used as evidence of the party's political strategy and to appease its electorate. This strategy also included public policies with slight (re)distributive implications (e.g., on minimum pensions) in order to attract voters and weaken the Social Democrats.

The DF's political strategy also allowed it to maximise the power of its votes and claim the importance of the results achieved, justifying the need to compromise with the other parties on other policy fronts, typically on the economy and tax cuts (see, e.g., Rathgeb and Klitgaard 2021). Deschouwer (2008) distinguishes between two types of new parties: 1) those whose influence is based on their blackmail potential and 2) those parties that have achieved governing potential. In the decade from 2001 to 2011, the DF benefited greatly from its blackmailing potential and considered the organisational, ideological, and electoral pressures and costs associated with achieving direct governmental responsibility too high (Bolleyer 2008). From this perspective, the first time in government is clearly more difficult for a newly formed party with no previous experience in public office and a relatively undeveloped policy agenda. There are several reasons for this, including the challenges inherent in the identity shift that takes place when the party shifts from operating in the opposition to being a part of government; the need to take positions on issues that are less electorally relevant for the party; and the risk of losing votes as a result of unpopular decisions and missteps by party members.

This is also one of the reasons why being in government is not a "default position" for such parties but often "the result of a deliberate choice" when the conditions are ripe (Deschouwer 2008: 14). It is also one of the reasons why the DF has always opted for the middle ground between government and opposition, i.e., the role of sup-

porting a minority cabinet. This role was also considered more attractive in a country accustomed to minority cabinets, where the supporting party can benefit from its dual role as government shaper and coalition shaker. In addition, as Meguid observes, populist radical right parties, often classified as niche parties, "eschew the comprehensive policy platforms common to their mainstream peers, instead adopting positions only on a restricted set of issues [and] rely on the salience and attractiveness of their one policy stance for voter support" (2005: 348). For the DF, as for other populist radical right parties, the role of the party leader was not only to form a coalition government but also to serve as the party's political voice. This stance centres on opposition to asylum, immigration, and EU integration, driven by welfare chauvinism and ethnonationalism (Rydgren 2010; Berman and Snegovaya 2019).

The populist momentum peaked in 2014/2015 when the DF won 21.1 per cent of the vote in its most successful parliamentary election in 2015. This result put the party in second place behind the Social Democrats (26.3 per cent) and well ahead of the V (19.5 per cent) and the KF. It was a historic success for the DF, which gained 37 seats in parliament (out of 179). At the same time, the V slipped to third place, its worst electoral rank since 1988, although the party recently recorded an even worse voter share performance in the 2022 elections (13.3 per cent). Similarly, the DF had achieved a remarkable result in the 2014 European Parliament election, becoming the largest party with 26.6 per cent of the vote. The party's main European Parliament candidate, Morten Messerschmidt, was also the candidate with the highest number of personal preferences (540,000) ever in a European Parliament election (even more than the former prime minister, Social Democrat Poul Nyrup Rasmussen).

The electoral decline that followed was as remarkable and rapid as the party's rise. In fact, the DF did not use the remarkable electoral results of those years to make claims for key ministerial positions. Instead, as former leader Kristian Thulesen Dahl explained: "[...] for the time being, there is not enough interest [from our side] to get the

Danish People's Party into government [...] as our [political] influence will not be as strong by pursuing that strategy" (Brandt Petersen 2015). The DF stuck to its middle ground tactic, which was seen as less risky and allowed it to avoid direct government responsibility and, allegedly, the unpopularity that some of the government's decisions would entail. The party could keep its distance from direct hands-on involvement with the establishment and responsibility while pursuing political achievements by tolerating the government. This allowed the DF to continue to use populist, anti-establishment rhetoric when the government faced challenges and criticism. Later, Thulesen Dahl and other MPs would say that this was, in fact, a big mistake, partly because the party was then differently positioned in terms of party organisation, experience, and support than it had been in the past. As Thulesen Dahl later admitted: "We should have gone into government in 2015. [...] In the future, we need to make clear that the party is ready to get into government, should the centre-right coalition get the majority of the vote again" (Funding 2019, own translation). But, it was too late for the party to try to shift from a "policy-seeking" to an "office-seeking" position (Müller and Strøm 1999).

In 2019, the DF's electoral support was cut in half. The party leadership's efforts to regain its position and support among voters and party members by touring the country from end to end were unsuccessful. In the 2021 local elections, the DF received only 4 per cent. It was the end of a golden era. It also triggered deep-rooted internal party disagreements and growing dissent among the rank and file, igniting personal conflicts over who should succeed Thulesen Dahl as leader. The election of hardliner Morten Messerschmidt in January 2022 (even though his main rival, Martin Henriksen, held even harder positions against immigration and Islam) was strongly influenced by party founder Pia Kjærsgaard, who had exerted strong pressure for Thulesen Dahl to step down. Pia Kjærsgaard did not appreciate Thulesen Dahl's attempts to get closer to the Social Democrat Mette Frederiksen, and in particular, his explicit invitation to call him ("Mette, you have my number!") if she got into trouble with the

left-wing coalition (Olsen, T. L. 2018). This political manoeuvre did not pay off, and the DF leader had to campaign with the slogan "You know what we stand for!", which sounded more like a reassurance to confused DF voters than a proclamation of political coherence.

The plan to play the role of government shaper, this time together with the Social Democrats, failed, and Thulesen Dahl, who advocated for a less radical framework for the party, admitted after the vote that the party would not have the electoral strength and mandate to change the winning team. Moreover, former Liberal Prime Minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen had already and quite unexpectedly published his ideas in his 2019 book *Befrielses øjeblik* [The Liberation Moment], in which he elaborated upon his plan to create a broad centrist governing coalition that could do without the political extremes. His announcement surprised almost everyone in his former party, in part because he argued for the need to do without the radical left and right despite the fact that his party had cooperated closely with the DF since 2001. After the 2022 general elections, this scenario became a reality. After several rounds of negotiations, the Social Democrats and the Liberals finally formed a coalition government with the participation of Løkke's newly founded party, the Moderates.

The DF's rapid electoral decline after its 2015 victory was the result of several factors. First and foremost, the party had failed to use its remarkable electoral success to gain political influence and recognition to demonstrate the party's governing potential and reliability after a decade spent in the role of coalition supporter. The strategy of acting as the "social conscience" of the V and KF government, monitoring threats to the welfare state (Kristensen 2012), no longer satisfied DF voters. Similarly, the attempt to reach out to the Social Democrats did not convince those supporters who prioritised issues such as opposition to migration and stricter integration rules. As a result, supporters began to doubt whether the DF would ever be able to govern effectively and be accountable. This element illustrates that the electoral success of

populist radical right parties also depends on their own ability to move from opposition to governance, a challenge exacerbated by their typically limited experience in government. Parties themselves help shape the strategies that either facilitate or thwart their transition to new roles of greater responsibility, especially when they lack solid governmental experience and concrete plans for implementing their policies. This has been one of the political constraints on the DF's strategy in the life stages of the party.

The party crisis and the new leadership triggered increasing discontent within the party. This violated the internal rule of "not airing dirty laundry in public", which was consistently maintained when Pia Kjaersgaard was at the helm of the party (Meret 2015). Since 2022, eleven elected members of *Danmarksdemokraterne* (Denmark's Democrats, DD) have come from the ranks of the DF. This includes DD Kristoffer Hjort Storm, who was elected as a Member of European Parliament (MEP) in 2024 and had been the party's representative on the Aalborg City Council for several years. The DD is a populist radical right party of recent formation (launched in 2022) and is led by former Liberal MP Inger Støjberg. Støjberg is known for her hardline stance on immigration and asylum while serving as minister of immigration and integration from 2015 to 2019. Støjberg was a leading figure within the V and led the charge when it came to promoting the party's tough stance on immigration and integration. She provoked heated debates in her position as minister; for example, in 2017, she publicly celebrated the 50th anniversary of the tightening of the Aliens Act with a cake. Significantly, Støjberg's political career within the ranks of the V Party came to a halt when she was sentenced to 60 days in jail after she issued an order in 2016 to separate married asylum seekers if the bride was under 18, which was deemed a violation of the law. Asked by Kristian Thulesen Dahl if she was interested in running for the DF, she declined, but later founded her own party.

The DD secured 8 per cent of the vote in the 2022 parliamentary elections, with a very slim political program and the charisma of a female

populist leader. The DF received only 2.6 per cent. The DD is now the DF's main rival on the populist radical right, especially in rural areas. Both parties espouse anti-establishment, anti-immigration, anti-refugee, and nativist positions and are welfare chauvinist and EU-sceptic. Competition on the political fringes, but also with the mainstream, has been pushing these parties towards more radical positions, and the DF has returned to anti-EU positions, urging for Denmark's exit from the EU and proposing Denmark follow the Swiss and Norwegian models. Recently, the two parties have expanded their opposition to higher taxes on diesel and agriculture to reduce carbon emissions, especially if they come from the EU (Matthews 2024). Overall, populist radical right parties, including the *Nye Borgerlige* (New Right), a radical right party founded in 2015 and now no longer represented in parliament, received a total of 14.7 per cent of the vote in the 2022 general election. This suggests that the DF's decline since 2019 does not necessarily mean a decline in the demand for populist and nativist politics in the country.

The share of voters interested in casting their ballots for populist radical right parties continues to be significant, even if they are not all voting for DF. Other parties have emerged to appeal to these voters, and the newly formed DD must be included in the equation if we want to understand recent developments in the country, including the growing discontent and grievances coming from rural areas. In the first place, the DF undermined itself and its achievements by failing to take the necessary steps and prepare the strategy to achieve governmental responsibility and influence. The party's implosion was triggered primarily by endogenous factors at the leadership, organisational, and programmatic levels, which added up to the exogenous elements that will be discussed in the following sections. The next section looks at how traditional mainstream parties of the right and left have responded to the rise and development of the populist radical right in the country.

From Accommodation to Restriction: Political Dynamics and the Centre-right (2001–2015)

The period from 2001 to 2007 was characterised by an accommodative strategy under the cabinets led by Liberal Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen. Several restrictions on immigration and asylum were introduced, including the controversial “start help” in 2002, which set social welfare benefits at a much lower rate for people with less than seven years of residence in the country. This contributed to the impoverishment of many refugees and immigrants. In addition, a law was passed requiring both partners in a family immigration case to be at least 24 years old and to have a “stronger attachment” (cultural, economic) to Denmark than to any other country in order to qualify for a residence permit. In addition, stricter criteria for obtaining citizenship were introduced (including additional social and cultural knowledge required to pass the mandatory citizenship test), and new amendments to the Danish Aliens Act emphasising assimilationist conditions were passed.

The publication of twelve cartoons in one of Denmark’s largest daily newspapers, *Jyllands-Posten*, that addressed and ridiculed the Prophet Muhammad sparked significant national and international controversy and a global debate about the limits of freedom of expression, tolerance, and respect for religious beliefs (see, for example, Hervik 2012). The aftermath also triggered further anti-Islam and anti-Muslim views (Meret and Gregersen 2019) and narratives of Islam as an illiberal, fundamentally dogmatic culture in which Muslims struggle to properly integrate into and accept Western liberal democratic values (Yilmaz 2016). The DF began to use gender equality arguments to actively criticise Islam and Muslims, claiming that their culture promotes male chauvinism, inequality, and homophobic views, thereby oppressing women (Meret and Siim 2013) and endangering sexual minorities. More generally, political debates have been dominated by a “struggle over values”, framing policy issues as moral, cultural and identity conflicts, thereby reinforcing moral

panics and the perception of immigration as primarily a security and cultural problem best addressed through assimilation rather than integration, coexistence and dialogue. These views also clearly encouraged policy solutions aimed at drastically reducing the number of arrivals while favouring migrants and asylum seekers with Christian backgrounds from Christian countries. The DF played a central role in shaping and promoting these frameworks, collaborating with the mainstream right-wing parties and influencing their policies.

Beginning in 2014, the centre-right began to co-opt the DF’s positions on issues of immigration, asylum, and integration. A case in point is the passage of Act L87, also known as the *smykke-loven* or the jewellery law. This law was passed in 2016 on the initiative of the then Liberal Minister for Immigration and Integration, Inger Støjberg, and allowed for the confiscation of economic assets, such as jewellery, from asylum seekers to cover the costs of their stay in Denmark. Even though it was rarely used, the law attracted considerable international attention and criticism for challenging the basic humanitarian principle that asylum protection should not be paid for (see Rytter et al. 2023: 13). The right-wing government also launched an international dissuasive media campaign, including the publication of warning advertisements in Lebanese newspapers advising against coming to Denmark (Gormsen 2015).

In addition, the centre-right urged further action against what has been described as the formation of a “parallel society,” where people with the same problems are “clustered together” and form “ghettos [that] also extend their tentacles into the streets,” due to “lax immigration policies [that] allowed more people into Denmark than we were able to integrate” (Løkke Rasmussen 2018, own translation). The idea that the country cannot accept more migrants than it can integrate has led to the implementation of measures to prevent new arrivals, facilitate repatriation (including by force), and the suspension of the UN quota of refugees accepted annually for several years.

In 2019, the right-wing parties in parliament, together with the Social Democrats, passed a comprehensive package of legislative changes on migration and asylum, which became known as the “paradigm shift” in immigration policy. The core of this law was the shift from integration and inclusion of refugees in Danish society (including through the granting of permanent residence) to an agenda of temporary stay and forced repatriation (Rytter et al. 2023; see other chapters in this book). Recently, plans to transfer asylum seekers to third countries, effectively outsourcing their reception and management, have gained widespread political support (from both the mainstream centre-right and left) despite the serious and concrete humanitarian, legal, and political concerns raised by these plans, which cast doubt on their long-term sustainability, as evidenced by similar attempts in other countries (see Meret 2024).

From Rights for All to Individual Responsibility: The Social Democrats’ Right-wing Shift on Immigration

On April 5, 2024, MP Frederik Vad, former leader of the Social Democrats’ youth section and the party’s spokesperson on immigration and integration, gave a controversial speech in the Danish parliament (Folketinget 2024). The speech emphasised the need for MPs to carefully read a Swedish crime prevention report that, according to Vad, demonstrates the infiltration of Sweden’s public administration and social sectors by individuals from ethnic minorities with the aim of undermining Swedish society from within. Vad emphasises in his speech that this is not only a problem for Sweden but also for Denmark, where its implications are still largely ignored by politicians and public opinion, and that more public awareness and action are needed.

The open speech specified the need to add a third issue of attention to the already existing ones, which are 1) work, education and decent housing; 2) a clean criminal record. According to Vad, these are not enough to ensure full integration into Danish society. Similar to Sweden, Vad

suggests that “people belonging to clans and gangs and specific ethnic environments” may already have infiltrated significant sectors of society in Denmark, affecting everything from private businesses to public administration; he claims state institutions are infiltrated with treacherous “civil servants, caseworkers, prison officers, dock workers” (Ibid.). He went on to claim that “a parallel society is no longer just a residential area in Ishøj. It can also be a cafeteria table in a government agency. It can even be a local pharmacy in Northern Zealand” (Ibid.).

Most of the party leadership supported the need for action as formulated in the statement. Later, however, several Social Democratic mayors and local activists voiced their disagreement with Vad’s statements, explicitly distancing themselves from positions that could arouse suspicion and alarm in the labour milieu and the public. Among them, Ole Bondo Christensen has publicly argued that Vad’s speech was “unnecessarily simplistic” and wrongly associated well-educated and well-integrated immigrants with extremism and radicalisation. He suggested a more nuanced and respectful discourse as a necessary approach to avoid further misunderstandings and unnecessary complications for municipalities and street-level bureaucrats. This episode exemplifies current trends in Danish social democratic political discourse on immigration and integration. It highlights the normalisation of nativist positions that question the ability of non-Western people, especially Muslims, to integrate into Danish society. People with an ethnic minority background are distrusted even if they fulfil most of the integration criteria.

Criticism from the Social Democrats’ rank and file regarding the party’s recent shifts on immigration and asylum policy is not new and dates back to the party’s 2019 endorsement of the paradigm shift (Meret 2021). This discontent is specifically aimed at the party’s rightward turn on migration and integration, as well as the perceived top-down culture that was initiated during the years of Helle Thorning Schmidt and fully implemented by the party’s right-wing circle in the years of Mette Frederiksen. As early as

2021, for example, a group of 24 Social Democrats, several of them elected to city and regional councils, signed an open letter explicitly referring to the “closed debate culture” within the party, where people feel “neglected and frozen out” and where those higher up in the hierarchy inappropriately crackdown on party members who express criticism of the policies being implemented, particularly in relation to immigration and integration.

This critique is closely related to the right turn initiated in the 2010s. However, the full implementation of this policy was decisively activated and pursued only after 2014-15. These years mark a pivotal moment in the Social Democrats’ political line on immigration and integration policies (Orhan 2024). The party’s previous pragmatic stances were replaced by a restrictive approach in a period marked by increased visibility of immigration and integration. During this period, the DF experienced a surge in electoral support and gained increasing support among manual workers. The “proletarianisation” of the radical right electorate (Betz 1994; Perrineau 2007; Betz and Meret 2012), which attracted white manual labour workers, was a concern for the Social Democrats. The DF began to be described as the party of the (white) working class (see, for example, Meier Carlsen 2000; Olsen, L. 2018). In addition, the DF indulged in describing itself as the bearer of the legacy of the classical Social Democrats, as when Pia Kjaersgaard went so far as to declare at a party conference that “a real Social Democrat today votes for the Danish People’s Party” (Danske Taler 2006).

While the mainstream right adapted to the DF’s success by cooperating with the party and co-opting some of its positions, the centre-left, traditionally more focused on socioeconomic issues, seemed challenged. In the period from 2011 to 2015, the Social Democrats returned to government by forming a coalition with the Socialist People’s Party. The latter won six cabinet posts for the first time. The two parties had developed a joint electoral platform that focused primarily on welfare state issues and labour market initiatives (such as the “A Fair Solution”

initiative launched in 2011), which also sought to shift attention away from migration. However, the two parties still relied on the votes from the Social Liberals to secure a majority and had to make concessions that affected the welfare state. Tax reforms, a failed collective bargaining agreement in 2013, and lower unemployment benefits further undermined the centre-left government’s credibility and popularity. In addition, the “refugee crisis” of 2015 marked a significant turning point in Danish politics.

The sight of asylum seekers arriving from Germany and walking along Danish highways had an impact on public opinion, which went from being supportive of accepting the spontaneous asylum seekers to becoming increasingly sceptical over time, especially when Sweden decided to close its borders. Before the 2015 elections, the Social Democrats had launched an election campaign calling for stricter asylum regulations and more individual responsibility and obligations (before rights) for immigrants. The Liberals responded by blaming the centre-left for lax immigration policies during their time in government, which had allowed an uncontrolled flow of asylum seekers into the country. The brief social democratic interregnum ended in 2015.

Since then, the Social Democrats have faced a dilemma in choosing policy positions on immigration and asylum to respond to the party’s increasingly diversified electoral constituencies (Nyholt et al. 2024). On the one hand, there is the constituency represented by a more educated, middle-class, and urbanised electorate (which generally supports pro-immigration positions), and on the other, the constituency with a comparatively lower level of education, which identifies less with traditional working-class party vote and lives outside the main urban areas. The latter group is characterised by more traditional values; is less progressive and open towards immigrants and asylum seekers; and has higher levels of dissatisfaction with politics and institutions (Andersen 2023). By adopting restrictive immigration and integration policies, social democrats risk alienating voters who are less critical of immigration (Etzerodt and Kongshøj

2023; Rathgeb and Wolkenstein 2021). Conversely, supporting pro-migration positions could alienate manual labour workers, creating a delicate balancing act for the party.

In this sense, whether social democratic parties can win back voters from populist radical right parties through anti-immigration shifts or rather through their positioning on traditional issues of welfare and redistribution is a question that has been debated both politically and in academic research (Krause et al. 2023; McManus and Falkenbach 2022; Abou-Chadi and Wagner 2020). Most of the evidence clearly suggests that moving to the right entails increasing risk in terms of electoral support as well as in terms of inter-party organisation and cooperation. Positional shifts alienate the most progressive and young voters and trigger internal party discontent and conflict, especially in the rank and file at the local level (Rathgeb and Wolkenstein 2021; Suad 2023; Meret 2021). Internal party divisions can further damage Social Democrats' electoral prospects if party positions are perceived as divided, contradictory, or disconnected from the party's ideological base.

Opinion polls suggest that the Social Democrats still benefit more from traditional welfare redistribution policies than from stricter migration and integration policies. A case in point is the so-called "Arne pension" reform, which was particularly popular among voters and a key issue in the party's 2019 election campaign. The reform allowed workers with at least 42 years in the labour market and physically demanding work to retire a few years before the official retirement age without the need for health examinations or medical certificates. The Social Democrats, with the support of the Left (and the DF), passed this measure, while the centre-right parties, including the Social Liberals, voted against it.

Conversely, the Social Democrats face a significant backlash when they implement welfare cuts. The abolition of the *Store bededag* (Great Prayer Day) in 2023, for example, led to a historic drop in support in the polls, with more than one in four voters deserting the party within six

months of the election (Madsen 2023). The government's rationale that the elimination of a public holiday was necessary to finance increased military spending failed to convince the public. This dissatisfaction has been particularly pronounced in light of the country's economic stability and near-full employment following the COVID-19 crisis, neither of which illustrate the need for further welfare cuts to the populace. The Social Democrats' coalition partners, the Liberals and the Moderates, used this crisis narrative rather as a strategy to justify concessions to them for their participation in the government.

The political trajectory of the Danish Social Democrats offers valuable insights, political lessons and practical guidance. However, the narrative of their successful strategy against populist radical right parties—achieved through increasingly harsh measures against migration—seems more a product of effective party communication than a reflection of actual electoral outcomes and the political situation. Moreover, there is little interest in considering where and when the limits of this drive for the toughest rules might be reached or how these measures affect the situation on the ground.

Electoral Consequences of the Right-wing Shift on Immigration

In the 2022 general election, more than 50 per cent of voters changed their party choice from 2019, while two-thirds made their decision at the last minute during the campaign (Hansen and Stubager 2024). This high voter volatility is related to several factors, including declining party identification and membership due to the emergence of newer cleavages, lower levels of political trust, and party loyalty, especially when dissatisfied with party performance. To attract support, parties have learned to prioritise voters' concerns, focusing on issue-based voting rather than relying solely on traditional class-based loyalties (see, for example, Campbell et al. 1960). Immigration is an example: Stricter migration and integration policies are adopted to attract support from voters who are particularly con-

cerned about the cultural and economic impact of migration on Danish society.

Issue ownership has been a key feature of new radical right parties (Williams 2006), helping them to fill the gap left by catch-all parties by investing in what could offer the electoral “winning formula” of the moment (Kitschelt 1997). In this context, the Social Democrats’ rightward shift on immigration is seen as a strategy to recapture working-class voters who had shifted their support to the DF. However, there is little evidence that this has been a successful strategy. For example, voter mobility seems to stick more consistently to ideological patterns, which means that voters are still rather unlikely to move across the left-right political spectrum. They are more likely to move between parties that they see as politically or ideologically related. For example, in the 2022 election, a core of about 20 per cent of the Social Democrats’ support came from voters who also supported them in 2019. The party then gained votes from the Socialist People’s Party (1.6 per cent) and the Social Liberals (1.3 per cent) and only to a limited extent from the DF (1.1 per cent).

In 2019, the Social Democrats gained about 10 per cent of the vote from former DF supporters, but this was due to the party’s socioeconomic positions rather than its rightward shift on immigration (see Etzerodt and Kongshøj 2022). Research also suggests that voters with strong anti-immigration positions tend to stick with populist radical right parties, finding them more convincing and coherent than others. In 2019, the DF lost more to the Liberals (Hansen and Stubager 2024) than to other parties. In 2022, when support for the Liberals fell to a shocking 13 per cent, the party’s lowest since 1988, many of the party’s former voters shifted again to the Denmark’s Democrats, led by former Liberal MP Inger Støjberg, or to the Moderates, founded by former Liberal party colleague Lars Løkke Rasmussen. Both politicians had founded a new party while sharing a common past within the ranks of the Liberals.

Another indication of the limited effect of the co-optation and adaptation strategy is the con-

tinued traction of newly formed parties that prioritise scepticism on immigration and nativist issues. The Denmark’s Democrats are a clear example of this trend. In total, the radical right bloc, including the Denmark’s Democrats, the Danish People’s Party, and the New Right, secured 14.4 per cent of the vote in the 2022 general election. In the European Parliament elections in June 2024, the Danish Democrats and the DF (the New Right did not run in the European elections) together received 13.8 per cent of the vote. This suggests that there is a consistent core of voters for the populist radical right.

In the last European Parliament elections, the Social Democrats managed to keep their three seats, but the party had its worst result in history, winning only 15.6 per cent of the vote. The party performed particularly poorly in the big cities as well as in constituencies considered to be Social Democratic strongholds. The Social Democrats are falling behind not only in terms of support in the major urban areas but also in terms of support among the younger generations, who are opting for other parties, such as the Socialist People’s Party, as was the case in the European elections. The European elections thus confirmed the downward trend that had already begun after the 2022 legislative elections.

The biggest surprise in the European Parliament elections was the result of the Socialist People’s Party, which received 17.4 per cent of the vote, attracting many supporters from the Social Democrats. This result allowed several observers to speak of a leftward turn in Denmark, compared to the right turn registered in other countries (Nørgaard and Refsing 2024). However, the election result prompted the Social Democrats to acknowledge their significant setback. Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen admitted: “It is a clear signal. I am listening. From a Social Democratic perspective, it was definitely not good enough. This also concerns the government” (Rønn Tofte 2024). The poor result reflects more than just dissatisfaction with the broad coalition government and its crisis-driven narrative that calls for sacrificing welfare standards and provisions. The new direction taken by the Social Democrats

may indeed have deeper and longer-term implications for voter support, generational engagement, policy coherence, electoral expectations, and intra-party consensus. Voters and party members are increasingly dissatisfied with the perceived neglect of pressing policy issues such as climate, childcare, health care, care for the elderly, and education—all core areas of welfare. In addition, the harsh rhetoric on asylum seekers and ethnic minorities contradicts the party's otherwise more inclusive, pragmatic, and progressive agenda.

Conclusions

Since the turn of the century, the Danish centre-right mainstream parties have adopted increasingly restrictive positions on immigration due to the success of the radical right Danish People's Party. In 2019, the Social Democrats joined forces with the centre-right and the radical right Danish People's Party to support the paradigm shift in Danish asylum policy, including the integration initiatives aimed at preventing the formation of "parallel societies" in so-called ghettos. Support for these policies has fundamentally changed the discourse and positioning of the Social Democrats in particular, a shift that has been developing for some time (Vad Jønsson 2018) but has accelerated in the last decade. As this chapter argues, the rightward shift in immigration and asylum policy has affected the party's electoral support and intra-party relations—but not in a favourable way for the party. The Social Democrats now face a critical choice of whether to stay true to their roots and principles or to compromise their values by continuing to counter the radical right by adopting the same approach. This political strategy has been far less effective and successful for the centre-right and the centre-left than the parties expected and could become very counterproductive in the future, especially if we consider that politics extends beyond the next electoral cycle.

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Conclusion

Lessons from Denmark and Beyond: Strategies for the Way Forward for Democratic Political Parties

by Jakob Schwörer

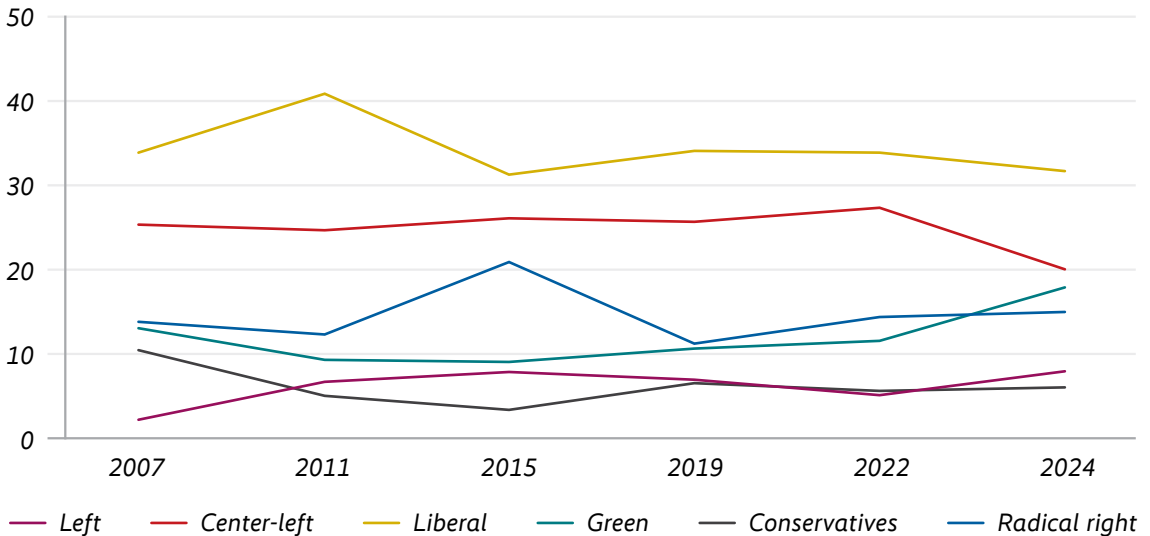
As a country with some of the most restrictive asylum policies in Europe, Denmark is a perfect case study for analysing whether such policies produce the desired results. It has been argued that the rightward shift of the mainstream parties, especially the Social Democrats, has strengthened them electorally and eliminated the radical right. Danish authorities and ministers repeatedly claim that the tough stance on refugees has limited the number of asylum seekers and increased the number of repatriations. Danish asylum and migration policy is also often discussed in the German media as a model for Germany, even though Germany, unlike Denmark due to its opt-out from the Justice and Home Affairs policy, is bound by EU legal standards in migration policy which would make Danish-style policies difficult to implement.

This book has shown that we can find neither empirical evidence nor good arguments for the thesis that the Danish approach successfully achieved its intended goals. Admittedly, it is extremely difficult to pinpoint the causes of fluctuations in asylum applications or deportations. Nevertheless, all the data and information collected here do not point to the Danish “paradigm shift” having a measurable effect. Instead of the policies increasing the number of returns, rejected protection seekers seem to be disappearing from the radar and return centres. While it is often assumed that they might travel to other EU member states or hide in Denmark, we do not really know where they are. Illegality is,

therefore, a direct consequence of the restrictive approach towards asylum seekers.

Even the “ghetto legislation” (now termed the “parallel society” package), which aims to create culturally mixed neighbourhoods through forced relocation within Denmark, does not seem to be working as expected. It has even been shown to have the opposite effect, as the case study in this book shows. In the remaining social housing buildings in the former “ghetto”, higher-income groups have moved away due to the reconstruction and stigmatisation of the area. The privatisation and restructuring have hardly led to more mixed neighbourhoods, as residents of the new buildings have little interaction with tenants in the public housing units. To date, little is known about whether forms of interaction between different income groups may occur in other environments in the area, such as schools and kindergartens. This edited volume only addressed one specific area of transformation in Denmark (Mjølnerparken), and the effects may be different in other cases. That said, the “ghetto” legislation has generally and undoubtedly led to increased stigmatisation and discrimination of residents with “non-Western” roots, even if they are Danish citizens. It is telling that even a member of parliament from Germany’s far-right AfD party, who visited Denmark with a party delegation to learn from Denmark’s restrictive asylum and integration policies, felt compelled to distance himself from the Danish model, which he found too radical in some respects: “An ultimately ethnic distinction like ‘Western’ and ‘non-Western’ is out of

Electoral Performance of Party Families in Denmark on the National Level



Note: Party classification based on Döring et al. (2023). Each party family includes only parties that have received at least 3 per cent of the vote in an election (Politico 2024). Left: Red-Green Alliance/Unity List; Green: The Alternative, Socialist People's Party; Centre-left: Social Democratic Party; Conservatives: Conservative People's Party; Liberals: Moderates, Venstre, Radical Venstre, Liberal Alliance; and, Radical right: Denmark Democrats, Danish People's Party, Nye Borgerlige. Data for 2024 according to opinion polls in October (Politico 2024).

the question for the AfD. For us, all people with German citizenship are equal" (Lau 2024).

Both people of "non-western" origin and asylum seekers have experienced increasing stigmatisation in Denmark since 2015, and especially since 2018/2019. With the new temporary protection status, which can be revoked at almost any time if the authorities observe an improvement in the home country, it is almost impossible for protection seekers to obtain permanent residence even after more than 8 years.

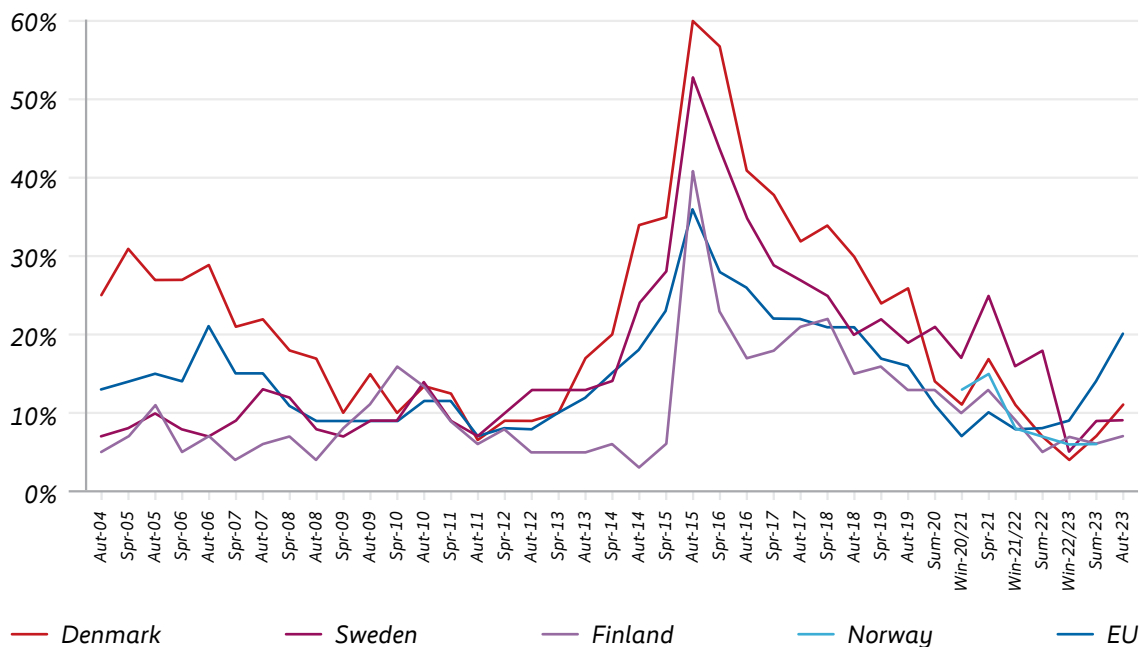
While some might have expected these reforms to strengthen democratic parties at the polls and reduce support for radical right parties, the results do not point in that direction. The radical right continues to demand even harsher anti-immigration laws, increasingly engages in "culture wars" and is as successful as it has been in the last decade, as shown in Figure 1. The Social Democrats, on the other hand, have not benefited from their anti-immigration turn but rather

from their leftward shift on social and economic issues. Recently, however, during the "grand coalition" with centre and centre-right parties, the Social Democrats have fallen into an electoral crisis. In the 2024 European elections, they achieved their lowest result ever with less than 16 per cent of the vote. They seem to be losing mainly to the Green parties, especially the Socialist People's Party, which has recently been polling as well as the Social Democrats. In fact, Figure 1 shows that the Greens are the only democratic party family that has significantly increased its vote share in the last 20 years for the national level.

One could further argue that even though democratic parties have not benefited from their shift to the right, and radical right parties are as strong as before, the salience of immigration in society may have decreased, and mainstream parties can now stop talking about asylum and immigration and focus on other issues with less "trigger" potential (Mau et al. 2023). But even this is open to question. The salience of immi-

The Salience of Immigration in the Nordics and the EU

Figure 2



Share of respondents naming immigration as one of the two most important issues facing their country (European Commission 2024).

gration in Danish society, as measured by the share of the population that considers immigration to be one of the two most important issues facing the country, has decreased significantly since the so-called refugee crisis in 2015; this is in line with trends other Nordic countries and the European Union as a whole (Figure 2). Denmark does not stand out in this broader context. Nevertheless, immigration has recently become more important in Denmark than in Sweden, Finland, and Norway. It is, therefore, very doubtful that the issue of immigration can be depoliticised through extremely restrictive policies.

Constructive Ways Forward for Mainstream Parties against the Radical Right

So, what are the lessons? What is the way forward for mainstream democratic parties? Even if it is not very satisfying, it is always easier to say what not to do. First, politicians should refrain

from adopting far-right rhetoric and policies in the hope of attracting voters away from the radical right. This has not worked in Denmark, where mainstream parties have felt pressured by the success of the Danish People's Party to adopt restrictive positions, and we have little empirical evidence that such a strategy has worked anywhere else in Western Europe (Abou-Chadi et al. 2021; Krause et al. 2023; Spoon and Klüver 2020). Denmark serves as a cautionary tale. Even a system of systematic disenfranchisement and institutionalised exclusion of protection-seekers and "non-western" immigrants and citizens has not weakened the radical right. The idea that centrist parties can win over anti-immigration voters from the radical right by adopting far-right positions has not shown itself to be effective. Indeed, talking extensively about immigration can actually increase the salience of the issue which mostly benefits the radical right due to their status as issue owners (Krause et al. 2023). But what can be done? While there is no strategy that guarantees electoral success

for democratic parties or the defeat of the radical right, I will outline some ideas with some supporting empirical data that can serve as inspiration for policymakers.

Attracting Attention for Own Issues

In particular, the concept of issue ownership and salience is crucial for determining vote choice and party behaviour (Bélanger and Meguid 2008; Budge and Farlie 1983; Petrocik 1996). As we have seen in Denmark, mainstream parties often respond to issues that are salient to the public or that are put on the agenda by niche parties that own the specific issue. Under these or similar conditions, mainstream parties talk more about migration (*salience*) and adopt positions from the radical right niche party (*positioning*) (Abou-Chadi 2016; Akkerman 2015; Bale et al. 2010; Schumacher and van Kersbergen 2016; Schwörer 2021; Van Spanje 2010). In terms of voting behaviour, votes are often determined by the salience of specific issues to individuals, and voters tend to vote for the party that “owns” the issue that is particularly important to them (Bélanger and Meguid 2008). Therefore, political parties need to build their issue reputations and gain public visibility for the issues they own, because electoral outcomes are a product of issue salience in society especially in times of weakening ideological links between voters and parties (Walgrave and De Swert 2007).

Niche parties are political parties that focus on a smaller number of issues than mainstream parties and have very strong issue ownership; these types of parties include populist radical right parties and, to some extent, green parties (Meguid 2005). Due to the societal cleavages from which political parties have historically emerged, mainstream parties are still associated with specific issues, although to a lesser extent than niche parties; for example, social democratic parties can be associated with social justice, and liberal parties with personal freedom.

It is important for political parties to position their issues in ways that appeal to the public.

The importance of issues for electoral outcomes can also be observed in the recent European elections. According to Eurobarometer surveys, migration was not a particularly relevant issue in the Nordic countries (European Commission 2024). The international situation, social and economic policy and climate protection were more important. As a result, left-wing and green parties that focus on these issues performed particularly well. In contrast, migration was a dominant issue in Germany and Austria, which can help explain the success of the AfD and the FPÖ.

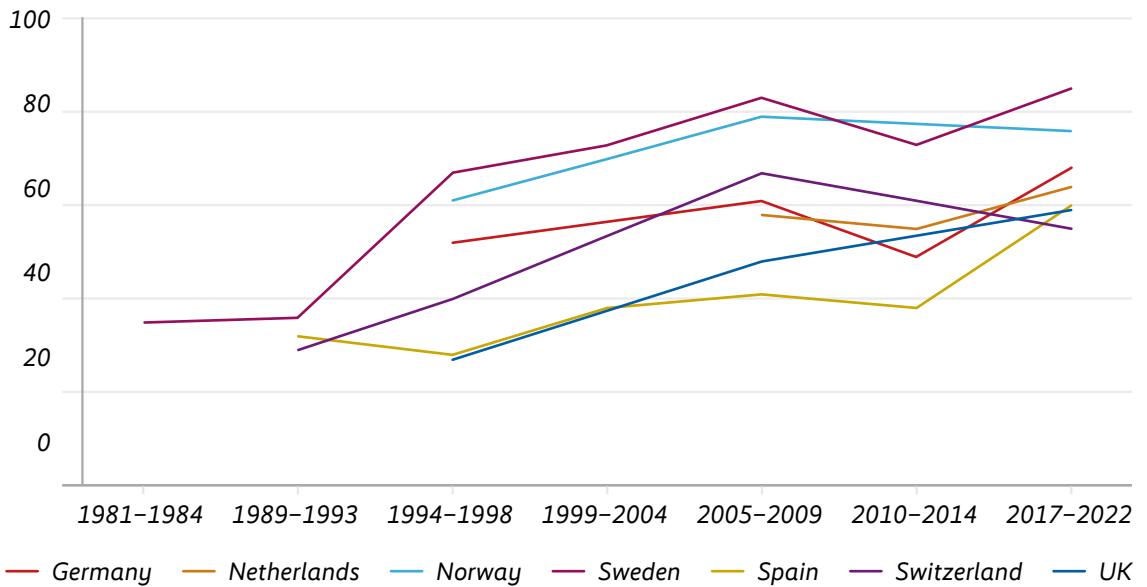
One of the most important lessons for democratic parties, at least from an electoral point of view, is to focus on developing and implementing strategies to raise the visibility of issues that the public associates with the party, rather than adapting the party to issues where it is far from the issue-owner. Increasing the salience of one’s own issues can reduce the salience of radical right issues and thus the electoral performance of populist radical right parties. This is easier said than done; it is worth investigating what kinds of effective communication and rhetorical strategies will increase media attention to one’s own issues; but a persuasive communication strategy also requires having own visions and political convictions.

Appealing to the Democratic Majority

Populist radical right parties are noisy. They effectively generate a lot of media attention for their negative messages through targeted provocations and protests. This can give the impression that they represent majority opinion and can lead to resignation and demobilisation of democratic civil society. Media coverage often favours the core issues of the populist radical right, giving them visibility, as studies from Belgium and Germany suggest (Boomgaarden and Vliegthart 2007; Walgrave and Svrt 2004; Walgrave and Lefevere 2010). At the same time, there are numerous empirical studies suggesting that media coverage of migrants and migration is often negative and increases prejudices of the “native” population towards people of different

The Development of Emancipative Values in Western Europe

Figure 3



Source: World Value Survey data. Data from Inglehart et al. (2022). Average score of the following items (Scale 0–1; 0.7–1 coded as emancipative): Note: 1. Reproductive choice: acceptance of divorce, abortion, and homosexuality; 2. Gender equality: support for women’s equal access to education, work, and power; 3. Voice of the people: priorities for freedom of speech and citizen participation in national, local, and professional affairs; and, 4. Personal autonomy: independence, imagination, and disobedience as desired characteristics of the child.

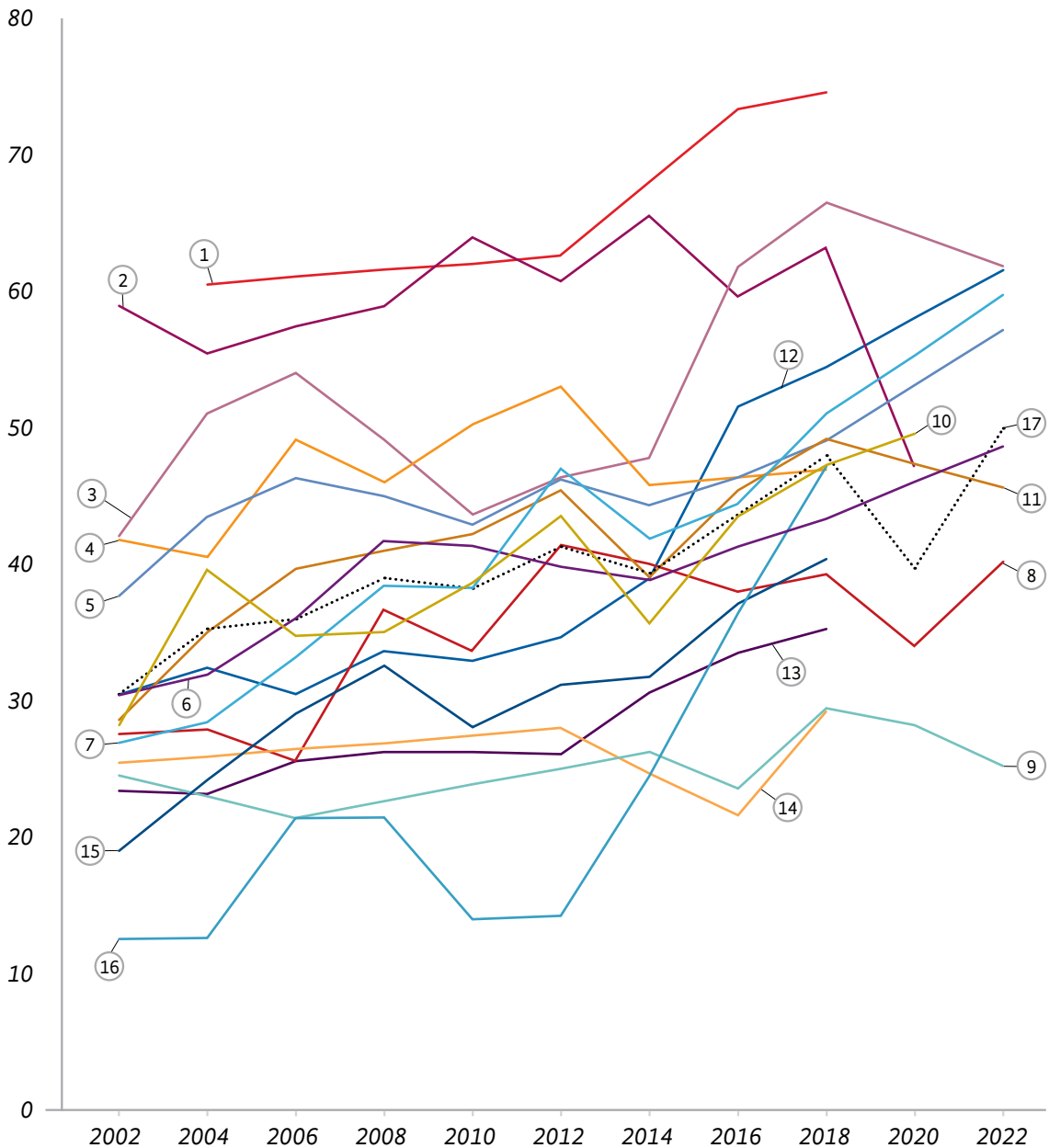
origin (Bleich et al. 2015; Boomgaarden and Vliegenthart 2009; Eberl et al. 2018; Erhard et al. 2022; Hooper 2014; Grobet 2014; Staglianó 2014).

In this context, it is helpful to keep in mind that Western European societies have become increasingly progressive and liberal over the past five decades, not more authoritarian and nationalistic, despite the rise of the radical right and its influence on the political and media agenda. “Emancipative” values — liberal attitudes toward freedom of choice and equal opportunity such as tolerance, freedom of lifestyle, gender equality, personal autonomy, and political participation — are on the rise in Western Europe (Inglehart and Welzel 2005; Alexander and Welzel 2011). In a sense, these values represent the other side of the traditional, authoritarian, and nationalist (TAN) values embodied by the populist radical right. The World Value Survey provides an “Emancipative Value Index” based on regular population surveys going back to the 1980s. There is a clear positive trend in all Western

European countries for which data are available. In the most recent survey (2017–2022), for the first time, a majority of respondents hold emancipatory attitudes in all countries (Figure 3).

Survey data indicates that attitudes towards people with a different origin are also becoming increasingly positive; it is not just liberal values regarding reproductive choice, gender equality, and tolerance that are on the rise. The European Social Survey (ESS 2024) has provided longitudinal data on attitudes towards immigrants since 2002. Figure 4 shows the proportion of respondents in Western European countries who agree that immigrants make the country a better place to live. The proportion of respondents answering that they “agree” has increased over the last twenty years in almost all countries in the sample. At the same time, the respondents choosing the “immigrants make the country worse” option are clearly in the minority in all countries, with one notable exception. The latest available data for Italy indicates that in

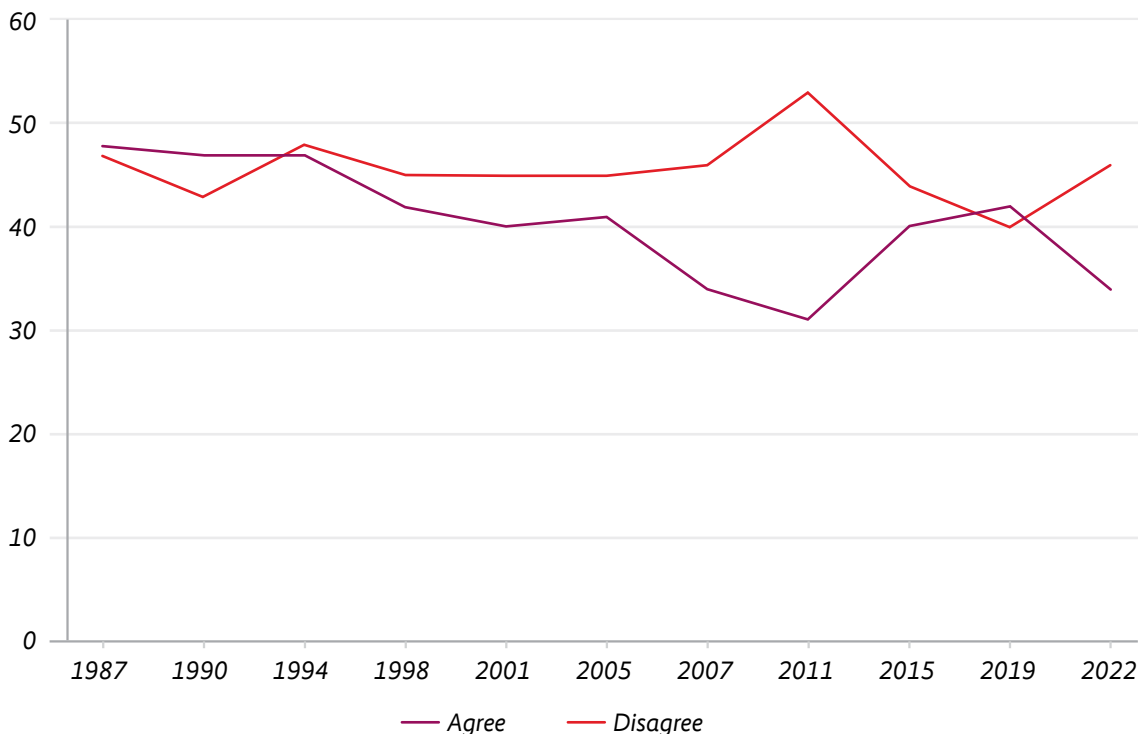
Share of Respondents Responding that Immigrants Make the Country a Better Place to Live



- ① — Iceland ② — Sweden ③ — Ireland ④ — Denmark ⑤ — Finland ⑥ — Switzerland
- ⑦ — Norway ⑧ — Germany ⑨ — Austria ⑩ — Spain ⑪ — Netherlands ⑫ — UK
- ⑬ — France ⑭ — Italy ⑮ — Belgium ⑯ — Portugal ⑰ — Average

Question: Is [country] made a worse or a better place to live by people coming to live here from other countries? Own illustration with data from the European Social Survey (ESS 2024). Scale 0–10: 6–10 coded as making the country a “better” place; 5 is neutral; 0–4 for “worse” place.

Share of Respondents that Agree and Disagree that Immigration poses a serious threat to Danish Culture



Question: I will now mention some views from the political debate that you can agree or disagree with. Immigration poses a serious threat to Danish culture. Strongly agree/disagree; somewhat agree/disagree; neither agree nor disagree. Own illustration based on data from the Danish National Election Study (Stubager et al. 2024).

2018, 50.1 per cent responded that they thought immigrants make the country worse.

These trends can be further confirmed by national longitudinal data; in Denmark, this can be seen by analysing data from the Danish National Election Study (Stubager et al. 2024). Figure 5 shows a general decline in the proportion of respondents who consider immigration a serious threat to Danish culture since 1987. The share of people who do not consider immigration a threat has increased slightly since 1990 and has been higher than the “agree” group since 1994. However, this trend was disrupted between 2015 and 2019, when the discourse became significantly more discriminatory amid the tightening of immigration laws described in this volume.

Temizisler (2023) draws on a comprehensive analysis of media coverage of migration between 2015 and 2018 in Denmark, Germany, and the United Kingdom to argue that media coverage in Denmark was particularly sceptical towards migrants in 2015. In line with the existing literature on the effect of media coverage on public opinion, she expects that this, together with the corresponding discourses of political elites, has shifted citizens’ attitudes in Denmark towards a more restrictive stance. This is in line with Hagelund’s (2020) observation that normative justifications for immigration policy have played a less important role in Denmark than in Sweden and Norway.

In sum, the Danish example suggests that negative attitudes toward immigrants decline over time but also that this process can be interrupt-

ed by hostile discourses from political elites and the media. There is a large body of empirical evidence showing that elites can reinforce xenophobic and nativist attitudes among the public with corresponding hostile discourses (Carter and Lippard 2015; Messing and Ságvári 2021; Schemer 2012; Schmidt-Catran and Czymara 2022; Wirz et al. 2018). Discourse from mainstream parties (Valentim et al. 2023) and media coverage (Bleich et al. 2015; Boomgaarden and Vliegthart 2009; Eberl et al. 2018; Erhard et al. 2022; Grobet, 2014; Hooper 2014; Stagliano, 2014) are particularly impactful on public attitudes. It is important to highlight that the clear shift towards emancipative and liberal values (including on immigration) is threatened by mainstream political elites and media when they adopt radical right discourses. This again underlines that accommodating radical right parties is the worst of all options for mainstream parties, as it not only gives more visibility to nativist issues but also contributes to a right-wing shift in public attitudes.

A crucial task for democratic parties should be to appeal first and foremost to the liberal-minded majority, which is often not sufficiently mobilised to have a strong voice in the media and public discourse. Nevertheless, it is the protests of liberal and progressive civil society that can have a huge impact on the salience of issues in society and on the agendas of political parties.

Examples from the recent past show that protests can influence media headlines and politics. Fridays for Future, for example, managed to elevate climate change to become a central issue in the media and in party manifestos that few political actors could avoid (Schwörer 2024; Schwörer and Fernández-García 2023). The anti-fascist protests in Germany, which gained momentum at the beginning of 2024, were also picked up by the media, put the AfD on the defensive, and led to the conservatives distancing themselves from the radical right. While this is not the correct venue to elaborate on the details of when and how protests become effective, it is important to point

out that politics and the media need pressure from the streets to change or produce different headlines.

Moreover, politicians can help mobilise the democratic civil society by appealing to the progressive sectors rather than constantly trying to appease the right-wing fringe. Although liberal-democratic values are capable of winning a majority in Western European societies, the dominance of right-wing issues in politics and the media can have a demobilising effect and lead to resignation among democrats.

Reframing Immigration

Talking extensively about immigration has the potential to further raise the salience of the issue, which populist radical right parties tend to benefit from; nevertheless, politicians often cannot avoid talking about the issue when the media and political competitors put it in the spotlight. That said, how elites talk about migration matters a great deal. As noted above, empirical evidence clearly shows that elite discourse, especially that of mainstream parties, has a significant impact on public attitudes by “activating” peoples’ identities (May and Czymara 2024; Valentim et al. 2023). Moreover, research suggests that mainstream elites may contribute not only to nativist public attitudes but also to more liberal values on immigration when they frame immigration more positively (Schmidt-Catran and Czymara 2022).

On the one hand, it is important to address the positive consequences of asylum and immigration for the country, such as the contribution of refugees and migrants to the economy and the welfare state. For example, “natives” seem to be much less hostile to immigrants when the latter are integrated into the labour market (Laurberg Myssen and Nørgaard 2024). Successful integration should, therefore, be given more space in the political discourse. In Germany, for example, refugee men have a higher employment rate (86 per cent) after eight years of residence than the average German male

population (81 per cent), a fact that is completely absent from media coverage and political discourse (Mediendienst Integration 2022). Instead, it is often claimed that the influx of people seeking protection will lead to a housing shortage, an argument that ignores medium- and long-term factors. Refugees and people with a migration background are heavily overrepresented in the German construction industry and are described by industry representatives as indispensable.¹ To put it bluntly, it is only through the immigration and integration of refugees that we can create housing at all.

On the other hand, immigrants and refugees should not be “valued” solely on the basis of their economic contributions. In addition to the positive messages, the perspectives and needs of refugees are often missing, not least due to the lack of their descriptive representation in national parliaments, which should also be on the to-do list of democratic parties. The scandalisation of real injustices, stigmatisation, and discrimination can make these hardships visible. Discrimination in the labour and housing markets, in the health care system, and in dealings with the authorities, as well as racist attacks, are unfortunately part of everyday life in Western Europe for immigrants and refugees. De facto work bans for asylum seekers, long waiting periods for decisions by immigration authorities, and the deportation of people who are well-integrated into the country should also be placed at the centre of the discourse on asylum and integration. The scandalisation of these truly scandalous conditions brings to the fore the problems and discrimination experienced by protection seekers and forces political actors to change the perspective of how we discuss asylum and integration. Talking about the hardships of refugees and the injustices they face in the host country makes it difficult for political actors to emphasise restrictive demands against refugees and asylum seekers in this discursive context.

Honesty in the Migration Debate

Politicians often try to reassure people by vowing to reduce the number of asylum seekers in the country. This is a very unrealistic and dangerous promise since receiving countries have rather little control over the number of people seeking asylum. As noted in the chapter by Martin Bak Jørgensen, existing empirical research suggests that refugees’ reasons for seeking protection in a particular country are unlikely to be influenced by host countries’ policies. After a thorough analysis of existing empirical studies, James and Mayblin (2016) found that the attractiveness of certain countries for asylum seekers depends less on the policies of the states themselves and more on factors such as social networks and the countries’ colonial past. A recent empirical study from 2024 confirms this finding, showing that social networks in the destination country are the most important reason for asylum seekers to apply for asylum there, while deterrent measures (e.g. work bans, cuts in social benefits) have little impact on the number of asylum seekers in the country (Di lasio and Wahba 2024). A 2013 study commissioned by the German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, which interviewed experts and asylum seekers, came to similar conclusions (Scholz 2013), finding that asylum seekers tend to seek protection in countries where they already have personal contacts. Moreover, traffickers often play a role in influencing the information asylum seekers receive and their choice of destination country.

The so-called “Rwanda model” has recently been on the agenda of several political parties, which hope to have found the key to closing the door to asylum seekers with this idea. According to this concept, people who reach Europe via the Mediterranean route, regardless of their origin, should be sent to Rwanda to undergo the asylum procedure. Rejected asylum seekers who are already in an EU member state would also be sent to Rwanda if direct repatriation to their home country is not possible. From a human rights perspective,

¹ See for example, meistertipp.de’s 2019 article, “Flüchtlinge sind eine Bereicherung für die Bauwirtschaft” [Refugees are an asset to the construction industry]. <https://www.meistertipp.de/aktuelles/news/fluechtlinge-sind-eine-bereicherung-fuer-die-bauwirtschaft>.

this idea is a disaster. Apart from the fact that people will be abandoned in a completely foreign country under detention-like conditions, it is questionable how, for example, fair trials according to EU standards and access to lawyers can be guaranteed. Rwanda ranks poorly in international indices of democracy and the rule of law, such as the V-Dem Institute's Liberal Democracy Index, even by African standards. The country scores only 0.1 on a scale of 0 (illiberal and undemocratic) to 1 (liberal and democratic).²

The enormous costs (Brandt 2024) are another absurd problem that makes the Rwanda project look like a bad joke. Great Britain's experiences in this saga can be instructive: The UK has concluded an agreement with Rwanda under which the African country will take in 300 asylum seekers. The UK is paying the equivalent of around 430 million euros for this and a further 142 million euros once the 300 people have been resettled. There are many other costs, such as staff and flights. In total, the cost per deportation can be up to 2 million euros. By comparison, in Germany, one asylum seeker cost the state around 12,000 euros in 2022.

Instead of raising false expectations with false (and expensive) promises, it would be courageous and sensible to tell citizens the truth: We will always be confronted with immigration and asylum seekers — sometimes more, sometimes less. In fact, there is reason to expect that there will be more rather than less migration to Europe in the future. Climate change (for which Western societies are primarily responsible) is causing increased drought, water scarcity, and the disappearance of entire coastal regions due to rising sea levels will increasingly drive people from their homes (UN Security Council 2023). Migration will increase, probably also to Europe, although estimates vary due to different assumptions, methodologies and operationalisations, and it is also difficult to predict whether people will migrate within their country or leave it (Beine and Jeusette 2021; Ferris 2020).

Without throwing human rights (and human lives) overboard, there seems to be no effective response to stem the influx of people seeking protection — especially when war or internal conflict erupts in other parts of the world. However, countries can prepare for future refugee movements by creating a sustainable infrastructure for the reception and integration of refugees. In many countries, reception capacity is often created on an ad hoc basis, with the result that local authorities are quickly overwhelmed.

By being more honest about immigration and developing a sustainable infrastructure for those seeking protection, not only could integration be more successful, but the public could be given a more realistic picture of immigration. Let's not forget that political elites can influence public opinion through their discourse, as discussed throughout this chapter and this book. Public acceptance of refugee integration can certainly be cultivated. Empirical evidence suggests, for example, that "locals" do not see working immigrants as a problem, largely regardless of the migrants' origin (Laurberg Myssen and Nørgaard 2024). Appropriate discourse, integration efforts (not least by reducing bureaucracy and facilitating work permits for asylum seekers), and opportunities for contact between immigrants and locals (see next point) can influence public opinion. For this to happen, politicians must be prepared to defend their own political visions against opposition and not give in too easily.

Facilitating Contact between Immigrants and "Natives"

Empirical research also offers some recommendations on how to combat xenophobic and right-wing attitudes at the population level. It may be old wisdom, but that doesn't make it any less true: Direct contact between "natives" and immigrants, for example, at work or among friends and acquaintances, is particularly effective in reducing negative attitudes toward immigrants.

² See: <https://v-dem.net/data/the-v-dem-dataset/>.

Attitudes towards Immigrants among People with/without Friends from other „Ethnic“ Groups

	Friends	No Friends
Better	48.8 %	41.7 %
Neutral	28.9 %	28.4 %
Worse	22.3 %	30 %
n	825	655

Question: Is [country] made a worse or a better place to live by people coming to live here from other countries? Own illustration with data from the European Social Survey. Scale 0 – 10; 6–10 coded as making the country a “better” place; 5 = neutral; 0–4 = worse place.

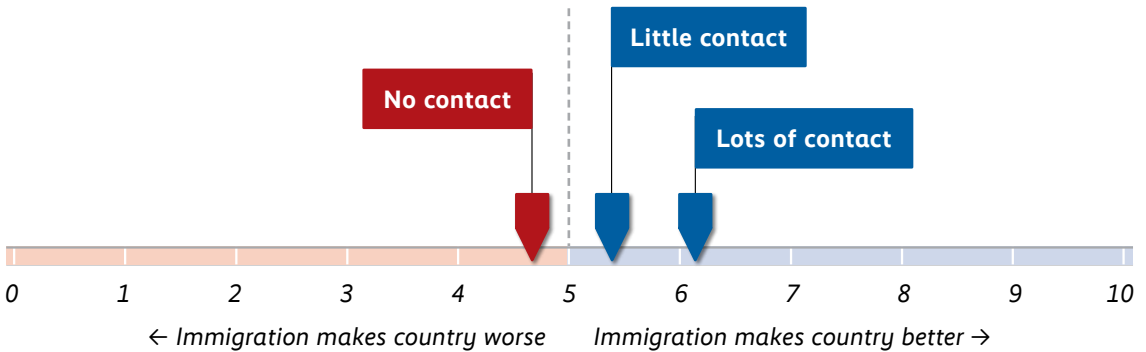
While under certain conditions, negative contact experiences can even increase prejudice against immigrants (Kotzur et al. 2018; Paolini et al. 2010; Pettigrew and Tropp 2006), the majority of scientific literature shows that in most cases contact with people from the “other group” leads to a reduction of prejudice (even against the whole group), changes values and feelings of threat, can increase trust in other groups, and can increase the willingness to forgive (Blascovich et al. 2001; Brown and Hewstone 2005; Christ et al. 2010; Esses 2021; Hewstone and Swart 2011; Pettigrew and Tropp 2008; Tam et al. 2007; Tam et al. 2009; Vonofakou et al. 2007). Furthermore, people generalise their attitudes to other outgroups that were not involved in the contact situation (these are termed “secondary transfer effects”; Pettigrew 2009; Tausch et al. 2010). Even indirect contact, i.e., contact with ingroup members who have had positive experiences with “outgroup” members, often has a positive effect (Aberson and Haag 2007; Prestwich et al. 2008; Turner et al. 2007).

In addition to providing data on attitudes towards immigrants (Figure 4), the European Social Survey also provides data on whether respondents have friends “from a different race or ethnic group” for the 2014/2015 wave for Denmark (Table 1). Only 22 per cent of respondents who say they have friends from other “ethnic groups” think that immigrants

make the country a worse place to live. Among respondents with a homogenous friend group, the figure is 30 per cent.

The same pattern can be seen at the European level. Figure 6 shows the attitudes towards migration of respondents with little, no, and a lot of contact with people from other groups. The data are based on a 0–10 scale where respondents are asked to indicate whether immigration makes their country a worse or better place (0 = worse; 10 = better). The data represent the average of 14 Western European countries. The more contact respondents have with people from other “ethnic” groups, the more positively they view their contribution to their own country. Only the group of respondents who have no contact with such groups believe — on average (standard deviation not considered) — that immigration makes their own country worse. The pattern is also the same within individual countries without exception (not shown in the figure); immigration is viewed more and more positively as contact increases.

Political elites should, therefore, consider how encounters between “natives” and “non-natives” could be facilitated and (financially) supported. Starting points for policies to promote such encounters could be found in, for example, housing policy (through affordable housing programs in



Own illustration based on data from the European Social Survey (ESS 7; European Social Survey 2024). Mean values for 14 Western European countries (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom). Question: Is [country] made a worse or a better place to live by people coming to live here from other countries? Scale 0 (worse) – 10 (better). Results for people with contact to several, to a few and to no people of other “ethnic groups”. N(countries)=14; SD(lots of contact)=0.55; SD(few contact)=0.53; SD(no contact)=0.6.

cities, not “ghetto policies” as in Denmark), the labour market (through employment measures for immigrants to increase interaction between newcomers and “natives”), and initiatives that actively promote such exchanges from which, in the best case, both “natives” and immigrants benefit. This could include the establishment of meeting centres, mentoring programs, language courses, or financially supported community projects (such as a community garden or renovation projects). Especially for voters with populist attitudes, i.e. those who no longer believe in the discourse of the democratic parties, contact with immigrants may be the only way to change their attitudes. If contact with immigrants reduces xenophobic attitudes, this also means that high immigration rates — coupled with successful integration policies — can even weaken the radical right in the medium and long term.

Conclusion

Denmark’s increasingly restrictive asylum and integration policies have been widely criticised by human rights defenders, international institutions, and advocates of liberal democratic values. The country’s approach, which includes stigmatising language and discriminatory practices tar-

geting asylum seekers and people of “non-Western” origin, has raised serious concerns about Denmark’s commitment to international human rights standards and principles of equality. It also provides a good example for scholars and policymakers of what not to do in dealing with the radical right and immigration. Hopefully, democratic parties can find better ways to overcome the divisive rhetoric of the far right. A starting point could be a new discourse on immigration — telling the public that people will continue to seek asylum in Europe, that there is little we can do to prevent it if we uphold human rights and “Western” values, but that policies can ensure better integration of newcomers into society. Politics can make a difference if democratic parties strive for majorities that support emancipatory and liberal values, which have been gaining ground in Western Europe for decades.

From both an electoral and normative perspective, it does not seem promising for parties to spread fear of (“uncontrolled”) immigration. Instead, parties should take a tough stance against the radical right and for the right to asylum. Although mainstream parties should politicise other issues than migration, which are more electorally profitable, a crucial task for democratic parties in the future will be to re-

frame immigration in a more positive way and to scandalise the conditions in which asylum seekers and other migrants often find themselves, forcing other parties to talk about these hard-to-justify cruelties instead of repatriation and border closures. At the population level, facilitating interaction between “natives” and immigrants can be a promising tool to combat xenophobia and anti-immigrant attitudes in the medium and long term. This is very old wisdom, and I am far from being the first person to suggest it. But precisely because it is such a truism, and one that has been confirmed time and again by empirical research, it is surprising that policymakers do not invest more on this front. We clearly see that people who socialise with people from other backgrounds are less likely to develop nativist attitudes.

The good news is that Western societies are not becoming more nativist — the far-right minority is just often louder than the liberal majority. Policymakers can both help mobilise the democratic majority by appealing more to it than to the far-right fringe and contribute to the emancipative value trend in Western societies through discourses and policies that can spread these values even further.

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