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Danish Immigration and Integration Policy:

Guiding Principles or Limited Lessons?



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Summary

Denmark's immigration and integration policies are often hailed as a model of control, coherence and pragmatism—but they have also been criticised as being a blueprint for exclusion. This paper asks whether the Danish experience offers guiding principles for others or merely limited lessons bound to its unique political and institutional context. It argues that Denmark's approach represents a deliberate political trade-off between social cohesion and liberal openness. By tightly linking access to rights with duties—especially labour market participation and civic conformity—Danish policymakers have redefined integration as individual responsibility rather than collective inclusion. While Denmark's policies have succeeded in stabilising political consensus and limiting support for the far right, their long-term integrative outcomes remain mixed. Ultimately, Denmark's model demonstrates that strict control and strong integration mechanisms can coexist, but not without ethical and social costs. Other European countries can draw lessons from Denmark's administrative effectiveness and policy coherence, yet should also heed the warning they embody: that integration driven by deterrence may produce adaptation without belonging.

Keywords Denmark – Immigration policy – Integration policy – Asylum – Labour market – Refugees – MENAP migrants – Voluntary return – Migration governance.

Introduction

Denmark has historically been characterised as a relatively homogeneous nation-state in terms of ethnicity—at the very least, it has maintained a strong self-perception of such homogeneity. This perception has been reinforced by a high degree of social

trust and political consensus, which has long defined the Danish welfare state.¹ As a country with a generous welfare system, a highly regulated labour market and high minimum wages, Denmark offers limited opportunities for low-paid jobs. Consequently, migrants arriving in Denmark have often faced significant challenges when trying to participate in the labour market, leading to a reliance on social benefits.

The demographic transformation of Danish society has been significant. Between 1980 and 2010, the number of immigrants and their descendants in Denmark grew by 390,000, with the majority originating from non-Western countries.² This marked a stark departure from historical immigration patterns, which had predominantly involved migration from neighbouring Scandinavian and European countries. In response to these changes, Denmark's immigration laws have undergone continuous revision. Between 1986 and 2002, the Immigration Act was amended 25 times, and between 2002 and 2016, an additional 93 amendments were passed—equating to more than one amendment every two months.³ Due to space limitations, this paper only examines the main features of Danish immigration and integration policies.

Overview of migration patterns

Denmark historically received only a small number of immigrants. In the 1960s a significant wave of immigrants from Yugoslavia, Türkiye and Pakistan arrived as part of a worker programme designed to address labour shortages in the economy. However, this programme came to an end in 1973 due to strong opposition from society.⁴

¹ T. Gudrun Jensen, K. Weibel and K. Vitus, “‘There Is No Racism Here’: Public Discourses on Racism, Immigrants and Integration in Denmark”, *Patterns of Prejudice* 51/1 (2017). Since the 1930s the idea of the homeland has been intertwined with democracy and social welfare—core elements of Danish statehood and national identity—reflecting a broader Nordic phenomenon often described as *welfare nationalism*. In public discourse, immigrants are frequently portrayed as economic burdens and as culturally incompatible with Danish identity.

² Ibid.

³ E. Gade Nielsen, ‘Deeming Damascus “Safe”: The Implications of the Paradigm Shift in Danish Asylum Policy and the Increased Focus on Return’, MIM Working Paper Series 22:2 (2022).

⁴ C. Green-Pedersen and P. Odman, ‘Going Different Ways? Right-Wing Parties and the Immigrant Issue in Denmark and Sweden’, *Journal of European Public Policy* 15/3 (2008); Gudrun Jensen, Weibel and Vitus, “‘There Is No Racism Here’”; S. Rezaei and M. Goli, ‘The “Housebroken” Far-Right Parties and the Showdown in Danish Migration and Integration Policies’, in M. Duszczek, M. Pachocka and D. Pszczółkowska (eds.), *Relations Between Immigration and Integration Policies in Europe* (London: Routledge, 2020).

After that, migration flows primarily consisted of refugees and family reunification applicants.⁵ The 1983 immigration law strengthened the right to family reunification, gave more rights to asylum seekers and made deportations more difficult.⁶ Several observers considered the new asylum legislation to be the most liberal globally.⁷ The passing of the law coincided with an increased flow of refugees from the Middle East,⁸ ultimately leading to immigration becoming a political issue and to calls for tighter asylum regulations.⁹

A new scheme was introduced in 2001, the key instruments of which were the limitation of refugee arrivals and family reunifications, and the strengthening of labour market participation requirements—the legislative changes combined incentives for immigrants to work with decreasing social assistance for non-EU migrants.¹⁰ With the Immigrant Package¹¹ introduced in 2000, labour market policies became key to Danish integration policy:¹² by 2010, full-time employment was a requirement for permanent residency, and by 2016, for citizenship as well.¹³

As a result of these strict immigration policies, Denmark has seen a rapid increase in the number of people that come to Denmark to work or study, including people coming from other EU or European Economic Area countries, but a dramatic decrease in the number of refugees and family reunification applicants.¹⁴

⁵ In the 1970s from Chile and Vietnam, followed in the 1980s and 1990s by refugees from the Middle East, Russia, Bosnia and Somalia.

⁶ A. Brøcker, 'Udlændingelovgivning i Danmark 1983–1986: Faktorer i den politiske beslutningsproces', *Politica* 22/3 (1990).

⁷ Gade Nielsen, 'Deeming Damascus "Safe"': C. Krell, H. Möllers and N. Ferch, *Reclaiming Action—Progressive Strategies in Times of Growing Right-Wing Populism in Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Germany*, Friedrich Ebert Foundation (2018); Rezaei and Goli, 'The "Housebroken" Far-Right Parties'.

⁸ The number of asylum seekers increased from 800 in 1983 to 4,300 in 1984 and 8,700 in 1985 (see J. G. Andersen and T. Bjørklund, 'Radical Right-Wing Populism in Scandinavia: From Tax Revolt to Neo-Liberalism and Xenophobia', in P. Hainsworth (ed.), *The Politics of the Extreme Right: From the Margins to the Mainstream* (2000)).

⁹ Green-Pedersen and Odmalm, 'Going Different Ways?'

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Denmark, Ministry of Immigration and Integration, *Lov om ændring af udlændingeloven og ægteskabsloven med flere love*, LOV no. 365 (6 June 2002).

¹² G. Myrberg, 'Local Challenges and National Concerns: Municipal Level Responses to National Refugee Settlement Policies in Denmark and Sweden', *International Review of Administrative Sciences* 83/2 (2017).

¹³ Denmark, Ministry of Immigration and Integration, 'Betingelser'.

¹⁴ Gudrun Jensen, Weibel and Vitus, "There Is No Racism Here".

Immigration and integration policy

Categories of migrants under Danish law

Denmark's statistical classifications differ from those of the EU. In Denmark, to be considered *Danish* requires an individual to not only hold a Danish passport but also to have at least one parent who is a Danish citizen and was born in Denmark. Everyone else is classified as either an *immigrant* or a *descendant*. An *immigrant* is a person born outside Denmark, with neither parent being a Danish citizen and born in Denmark; a *descendant* is a person born in Denmark, with neither parent being both a Danish citizen and born in Denmark.

Danish law furthermore distinguishes between migrants from Western countries (migrants and their descendants from the Nordic countries, EU countries, Switzerland, Canada, the US, Australia and New Zealand) and migrants from non-Western countries (migrants and their descendants from all other countries). In 2021 the Danish Ministry of Immigration and Integration introduced a new statistical category called MENAP, specifically for Muslim migrants from the Middle East and Africa. While migrants from Western countries are expected to manage quite well on their own, migrants from non-Western countries are considered socially, economically and culturally very different from Danes, and the Danish state has adopted specific measures to achieve their successful integration.¹⁵

¹⁵ Recent debates on immigration in Denmark have largely centred on Muslim immigrants, continuing a longstanding theme in Danish anti-immigration rhetoric (see Krell, Möllers and Ferch, *Reclaiming Action*; S. Meret, 'Denmark's Populism at the Crossroads: Insights Into the 2024 European Parliament Election Results', *European Center for Populism Studies*, 29 October 2024). Anti-Islamic discourse shows Islam as incompatible with Danish values, and portrays Muslim immigration as a threat to social cohesion, national identity and the welfare state. It often frames Islam as oppressive to women, using gender equality as a symbol of Western civilisation, while simultaneously linking Muslim migration to security concerns. Two far-right parties, the New Right (Nye Borgerlige) and Hard Line (Stram Kurs) represent the most radical positions. Both advocate for strict assimilation policies, but the latter goes even further, calling for a complete halt to migration from Muslim countries. Hard Line's demands include Denmark's withdrawal from international refugee conventions, the expulsion of all non-Western residents without Danish citizenship and a review—potentially leading to the revocation—of citizenships already granted to foreigners (see Rezaei and Goli, 'The "Housebroken" Far-Right Parties'). The selective approach became particularly evident in Denmark's response to the arrival of Ukrainian refugees following Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022. The chairman of the Danish People's Party (Dansk Folkeparti), Morten Messerschmidt, openly contrasted the reception of Ukrainians with that of migrants from Muslim countries, stating: 'When something happens in our own backyard, like Ukraine—

Amendments to Denmark's immigration and integration policies have thus primarily focused on immigrants from non-Western countries, many of whom reside in Denmark as refugees or as a result of family reunification.¹⁶

Integration policy

Until 2010 integration policies focused on refugees and people entering due to family reunification. The 2010 Integration Act amendment included two new provisions: first, successful integration became a condition for obtaining a permanent residence permit; second, it became the individual responsibility of each foreigner to integrate into Danish society.¹⁷ The benchmark for successful integration is participation in society, economic self-sufficiency, and an understanding of Danish cultural values and norms.

To achieve these goals, a three-step programme for migrants was introduced that includes (a) language education; (b) a course on Danish society, history and culture; and (c) various efforts to help them find a job. The main responsibility is delegated to the municipalities. As immigrants themselves are responsible for their integration, they sign individual contracts (*integrationskontrakten*) with the responsible municipality. The municipalities monitor the programme to ensure that the contract is adhered to by the immigrant.

The act introduced a new points system in which applicants receive points based on experience, language skills and education¹⁸ and which, among other elements, requires them to declare their intent to integrate and become an active citizen. In the declaration of active citizenship (*erklæring om integration og aktivt medborgerskab*)

there is only one country between us, and we only have good experiences with Ukrainians in Denmark—then of course we have to jump in. A human being is a human being biologically, but culturally and in how we behave, there is a huge difference between a Somali and a Ukrainian. We don't need more unskilled immigration from the Muslim world' (M. Messerschmidt, 'Når der sker noget i vores egen baghave, så skal vi selvfølgelig springe til', interview with Radio4 Morgen, 4 March 2022, author's translation).

¹⁶ For example, 60% of Syrian immigrants in Denmark are refugees, while nearly half of Turkish immigrants have settled in the country through family reunification provisions.

¹⁷ Retsinformation.dk, 'Bekendtgørelse af lov om integration af udlændinge i Danmark (integrationsloven)'.

¹⁸ Global Citizenship Observatory, 'Denmark: New Rules on Access to Permanent Residence Passed in Parliament on 25 May 2010' (2 June 2010).

applicants commit to participating in and contributing to society. This includes respecting Danish laws, upholding democratic principles, and acknowledging the illegality of using force or violence against spouses or children. Applicants pledge to respect personal freedom and integrity, freedom of belief and expression, and to recognise that discrimination based on gender, colour or religion is illegal. Additionally, they affirm their opposition to terrorism. They can receive up to 15 points for active citizenship by passing a special active citizenship test or demonstrating their involvement in Danish society through their participation, for at least one year, on boards, with organisations and so on.

Another major revision of the Aliens Act, the Integration Act, and municipal and regional electoral laws came about in 2019. Known as the *paradigm shift*, the 2019 amendment to the Aliens Act shifted the focus from integration to voluntary return and deportations.¹⁹

The integration programme for refugees was renamed the *financial independence and return benefit programme*.²⁰ The aim was to show that refugee status is *temporary*. Successful asylum seekers receive limited residence permits to stay in Denmark and the renewal of this status is subject to review, at which point the authorities decide whether an immigrant's return to his or her home country is still dangerous or not. The integration benefit that the refugees receive was renamed the *self-support or repatriation aid* ('return assistance')—with refugees being offered up to €5,400 to return home.²¹

Rejected asylum seekers are no longer entitled to monetary benefits and are transferred to detention facilities. As a result of this change, deportations have become easier to implement. Furthermore, a limit on the number of family reunions was established, with the limit variable from month to month.

¹⁹ Denmark, Ministry of Immigration and Integration, *Lov om ændring af udlændingeloven, integrationsloven, repatrieringsloven og forskellige andre love*, LOV no. 174 (27 February 2019).

²⁰ Denmark, Ministry of Immigration and Integration, 'Finanslovsaftale sikrer fortsat stram udlændingepolitik' (30 November 2018).

²¹ S. Sanderson, 'Denmark: Unprecedented Measures to Signal to Migrants They Are Not Welcome', *InfoMigrants*, 31 January 2025.

In December 2023 the Danish Parliament amended the 10-year rule for asylum seekers. This adjustment allows for the revocation of temporary residence permits if asylum seekers travel back to their home country, regardless of how long they have been in Denmark. Additionally, the Special Act on temporary residence for displaced Ukrainians was modified to align their treatment with that of other asylum seekers. This includes the potential removal of cash benefits for those displaying violent behaviour in housing systems.

While the rules for refugees and asylum seekers, especially from Muslim countries, have tightened, the regulation of Western migration and high-skilled labour provides more opportunities. In November 2023 Denmark introduced regulations permitting foreign employees of companies with Danish affiliations to work in Denmark for up to 15 days within a 90-day period without a work permit. This regulation is aimed at those in managerial positions or highly specialised roles and requires them to take a 14-day break between work sessions.

Additional amendments to the Aliens Act, which took effect in July 2024, streamlined the process for Danish companies to access work schemes, making it easier for them to recruit foreign workers. These changes also introduced greater flexibility for foreign employees seeking residence permits under these schemes. Certain foreign nationals can now continue their education in Denmark, even if their original reason for residency no longer applies, especially in sectors facing labour shortages. Those who receive a residence permit for educational purposes are now permitted to remain in Denmark for up to six months post-graduation to seek employment.²²

To assess the current data on immigration, the Danish government introduced an *Integration Barometer*, which offers data on various aspects of integration and can be accessed in English.²³

Migration patterns in Denmark

²² The amendment also added 'social and healthcare worker' to the Positive List for Skilled Workers, which identifies occupations experiencing a shortage of qualified personnel in Denmark. It increased the number of residence and work permits available for these professionals to 1,000 while streamlining the authorisation process for foreign healthcare workers.

²³ Denmark, Integrationsbarometer, 'Migration and Integration Statistics (in English)'.

Despite more stringent immigration regulations, Denmark has seen a consistent increase in net migration since 1998. As of 1 January 2024 the country's population included 943,066 immigrants and their descendants, representing 16% of the total population. Among these, 10% are immigrants and descendants from non-Western countries, while 6% come from Western nations. Over half of all immigrants and descendants in Denmark came from just 15 countries, with the largest contingent originating from Türkiye, which constitutes 7% of all immigrants and descendants. Following Türkiye, the next largest groups were from Poland (6%), Romania (5%) and Syria (5%).²⁴ The number of people living in the country without Danish citizenship has increased due to the strict naturalisation requirements. In 2022 only 1,400 people received Danish citizenship, which was the lowest number in 40 years.

Significant disparities exist in the employment rates among immigrants and descendants from MENAP countries and Türkiye compared to those from other non-Western countries. In 2022 only 60% of the immigrants and descendants from MENAP countries and Türkiye were employed, compared to 71% from other non-Western countries. The employment rate was particularly low among women from MENAP countries and Türkiye, at 53%.

However, descendants in this group have a substantially higher employment rate of 73%, in contrast to just 47% for immigrants. The labour market strategies have improved female employment (from 11% in 2016 to 24% in 2024) and significantly increased male employment (from 38% to 67% in the same period). The employment rates for refugees and people arriving as a result of family reunification schemes increased from 26% in 2016 to 36% in 2024.

Authorities

Denmark's Ministry of Immigration and Integration was established in 2002, taking on responsibility for asylum policy, regulated entry to Denmark, temporary and permanent residence permits, and integration policies. It leads Denmark's migrant integration

²⁴ Denmark, Ministry of Immigration and Integration, *International Migration – Denmark* (August 2024).

governance. The Ministry is responsible for residency, citizenship, common Danish language training and tests, integration, the prevention of extremism and radicalisation, honour-related conflicts and negative social control.²⁵

The National Council for Integration, set up in 1983, advises the integration minister and serves as a consulting body for integration-related political initiatives and public body operations. Under the auspices of the Danish Ministry of Immigration and Integration is the Danish Immigration Service (DIS). This agency processes applications for asylum, residence and family reunification, and makes the decisions about whether individuals are permitted to stay in Denmark. It also collects and analyses country-of-origin information to support asylum decisions. Appeals about the decisions made by the DIS are brought to the Refugee Appeals Board, which is an independent administrative body—its decisions are final with no other option for appeal.²⁶

Pivotal in executing this integration policy are the municipalities, responsible for housing, social benefits, education, childcare and healthcare access. They also oversee language training, typically outsourced to various managed language centres. Municipalities prepare their own integration programmes set within the national legal framework. The municipalities have been given the ability to adapt their integration policies and have done so—for example, larger municipalities such as Copenhagen or Aarhus provide a greater range of programmes than their smaller counterparts.²⁷

How does this system function in practice? For example, in Aarhus, the municipal labour office serves as the primary point of contact for newly arrived refugees and their families. Once they are granted temporary residency, the DIS notifies the labour office, which then collaborates with social services and public housing organisations to facilitate the integration process. Upon arrival, immigrants sign an integration contract at the labour office, outlining their responsibilities and detailing the integration

²⁵ Gade Nielsen, 'Deeming Damascus "Safe"', 5.

²⁶ The Refugee Appeals Board has recently overturned a high percentage of DIS decisions; in 2021, 43% of the decisions to revoke Syrian refugees' residence permits were overturned (*Berlingske*, 'Nævn omgør 43 procent af syreres fratagne opholdstilladelser' (26 November 2021)). The DIS responded by arguing that the high percentage of overturned decisions was caused by media attention on Syrian refugees rather than flawed rejections.

²⁷ Myrberg, 'Local Challenges and National Concerns'.

framework. The labour office assists with translating and validating essential documents, helps individuals prepare their curricula vitae, and provides guidance on the labour market and employment opportunities. Additionally, the municipality places a strong emphasis on Danish language education for immigrant children to support their integration into society.²⁸

Settlement

The recipients of international protection and their families cannot choose their place of residence in Denmark. Allocations are made annually to various municipalities according to specific criteria and quotas. The assigned municipality is responsible for carrying out the integration programme for new arrivals and receives an adequate amount of financial support from the state.²⁹

If an individual wishes to leave their assigned municipality before the three-year period ends, they are required to justify the move with either a job offer in another municipality or their acceptance into the designated target municipality. If they choose to relocate independently before completing the integration programme, the new municipality is not obligated to continue the programme and can halt provision of the state financial compensation known as the 'start package'. This system aims to ensure a more equitable distribution of newcomers, with municipalities that already have a high proportion of foreign residents receiving fewer new arrivals compared to those with a lower percentage of immigrants.

This policy has been regarded as successful as it has facilitated a smoother housing and integration process.³⁰ Integration is a long-term endeavour, and the three-year period is intended to help immigrants establish connections within their new communities, encouraging them to remain in the area even after the mandatory period has ended as they develop a sense of belonging.³¹

²⁸ For more on Aarhus, see, for example, A. Alsmæel, M. Pederson and A. Baaré, *Welfare Without Welcome in the 'City of Smiles'* (Aarhus, Denmark, 2018).

²⁹ Myrberg, 'Local Challenges and National Concerns'.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ A. Diop-Christensen, L. E. Nestor Diop and A. Bech Munzula, 'Does Enforcing Dispersal Policies Prevent Ethnic Spatial Concentration? Quasi-Experimental Evidence From Denmark', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 51/15 (2024).

The placement policies, reinforced by strong economic incentives, discourage refugee households from relocating from their assigned municipalities, thereby fostering a sense of belonging in Denmark. However, despite these positive outcomes, the long-term impact has been limited. The dispersion system failed to prevent the formation of areas with high concentrations of non-Western migrants and persistent socio-economic challenges, which ultimately led to the introduction of the controversial 'ghetto plans' in 2010, 2013 and 2018.³²

Employment

The programme includes job-focused activities such as career counselling, skills-enhancement courses, internships and, occasionally, subsidised employment. Denmark's job and training programme was launched in 2016 (and currently valid until 2028) to help refugees enter the labour market. It targets migrants aged 18 to 50, who have been in Denmark for less than 5 years, including those from Ukraine and Afghanistan. The two-year *Integrationsgrunduddannelse* programme combines educational and practical training. Participants receive a salary, work a minimum of 25 hours per week and undergo 20 weeks of training, which includes vocational courses, Danish language lessons and other skills, during a two-year asylum period. Managed by municipalities and employers, it includes language support from 'language buddies', offers trainee wages to refugees, qualifies them for unemployment insurance and provides financial incentives to employers.

Language training for children

Since the 2019/20 school year, primary and lower secondary schools with over 30% of students coming from socially vulnerable areas have held mandatory language tests. These tests are administered to all nursery-aged children and to students from grades one to nine who are not taking a course in Danish as a second language. Since 2016 language schools have had to schedule classes outside regular business hours to enable migrants to balance both work and educational training. Specific temporary

³² Ibid.

provisions apply to Ukrainian children and youth, including options to use English or Ukrainian for instruction, to use Ukrainian educational materials and to access online teaching from Ukraine, which helps to maintain their connection to their homeland.

Repatriation and deportation

Denmark supports repatriation—under the Danish Repatriation Act, immigrants who decide to return to their country of origin can receive assistance to facilitate their return. In 2019 the Act was amended to allow repatriation to Syria, and since then it has become the most common destination for repatriation, with the exception of 2023, when Türkiye surpassed Syria. In that year, a total of 304 individuals were repatriated.³³

In the specific case of Syria, Denmark had refused to collaborate with the previous Syrian regimes and so the only option had been voluntary return. Rejected asylum seekers who refused to return had to live under conditions of restricted movement and without financial support in Danish detention centres.

Some observers have argued that the strict conditions in the detention centres were meant to encourage rejected asylum seekers to voluntarily comply with the return programme even though data indicate that they did not seem to achieve this goal.³⁴ Over the past three years, a total of 235 individuals have been successfully deported from Denmark, accounting for approximately one-third of all those scheduled for deportation during this period.³⁵ The capacity to deport rejected asylum applicants is low given the high priority of the return policy and the new instruments that encourage voluntary return. We can observe what Gade Nielsen has called a ‘hampered enforcement regime’: a strong enforcement interest having to overcome weaker enforcement capacity to return asylum seekers.³⁶

³³ Denmark, Ministry of Immigration and Integration, *International Migration – Denmark* (August 2024).

³⁴ The Freedom of Movements Research Collective, *Stop Killing Us Slowly: A Research Report on the Motivation Enhancement Measures and the Criminalisation of Rejected Asylum Seekers in Denmark* (2018).

³⁵ Sanderson, ‘Denmark’.

³⁶ Gade Nielsen, ‘Deeming Damascus “Safe”’, 6.

The limited capacity to deport is also the reason why there is much more emphasis on voluntary returns and the state has tried to create positive and negative incentives for people to choose to leave. Denmark has also attempted indirect deterrence through 'negative nation branding'.³⁷ It has been advertising in African and Arab countries to discourage migrants from coming to Denmark. It has also repeatedly discussed the notion of outsourcing asylum procedures to Rwanda.

Assessment

While challenges remain and individuals with international protection generally have less secure positions in the Danish labour market compared to ethnic Danes, the policies are yielding some positive outcomes. An increasing number of refugees, asylum seekers and their families are gaining economic independence and proficiency in Danish. Furthermore, descendants of migrants or those with international protection often achieve higher educational levels and are more likely to pursue higher education than ethnic Danes of comparable socio-economic status.

While public discourse in Denmark has largely focused on non-Western migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, the number of immigrants from EU and other Nordic countries has risen significantly. Each wave of EU enlargement, particularly from Eastern Europe, has brought an increase in EU citizens moving to Denmark. However, unlike some other EU countries, Denmark has not engaged in negative campaigns against migrants from countries such as Poland or Romania. This is partly because EU migrants are generally perceived as coming to Denmark primarily for work and as being likely to leave if they cannot find employment, which contrasts with the notion that non-Western migrants are more inclined to rely on the welfare state.³⁸

Danish immigration policy enjoys broad popular support, which has decreased its politicisation, and thus reduced support for the extreme right.³⁹ Contrary to the expectations of many experts, Denmark seems to have found a way to marginalise

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Rezaei and Goli, 'The "Housebroken" Far-Right Parties'.

³⁹ D. Leonhardt, 'In an Age of Right-Wing Populism, Why Are Denmark's Liberals Winning?', *New York Times Magazine*, 24 February 2025.

the extreme right by adopting a strict approach to immigration among the established parties, including the Social Democrats (Socialdemokratiet).⁴⁰ There seems to be an agreement that immigration flows should be reduced, integration should be more aggressive and irregular migrants deported rapidly. Danish society is changing but not as fast as in Germany or Sweden, and the initial criticism has faded, with many looking to Denmark for inspiration.

Others are more critical. The 2019 Migrant Integration Policy Index, which reviewed the years 2007–19, found that Denmark’s integration policies presented nearly as many obstacles as they did opportunities for non-EU immigrants, ranking it lower than other Western European/OECD countries.⁴¹ Despite various policy measures and a strong emphasis on labour market integration, non-Western immigrants continue to face significant barriers to employment and participation in the Danish workforce. This group has a higher proportion of children and young people compared to the general population, yet their overall employment rate remains lower than that of native Danes, with the disparity even more pronounced among non-Western women. Furthermore, non-Western immigrants and their descendants are disproportionately represented among recipients of unemployment benefits. Their difficulties in entering the labour market are also reflected in the relatively high number of self-employed individuals within this group. Additionally, they are overrepresented in low-skilled jobs compared to the Danish-born population, underscoring persistent challenges in securing stable and higher-skilled employment opportunities. The review process raised fundamental questions about how ‘safety’ is defined in determining when refugees can be returned. The short duration of residence permits for refugees and asylum seekers, combined with reduced financial support, places this group in a precarious position—one that limits their ability to integrate into Danish society. At the same time, predicting when

⁴⁰ While some authors argue that the Danish centre–right played a central role in reshaping immigration and integration policies and the accompanying rhetoric during the 2000s (Green-Pedersen and Odmalm, ‘Going Different Ways’), these trends did not reverse when the Social Democrats returned to power in 2019. The Social Democratic government further tightened the regulations, with Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen advancing a ‘zero vision’ aimed at reducing the number of asylum applications to zero. For an analysis of Social Democrats’ responses to right-wing populism in Denmark, Germany, Norway and Sweden, see, e.g. S. F. Etzerodt and K. Kongshøj, ‘The Implosion of Radical Right Populism and the Path Forward for Social Democracy: Evidence From the 2019 Danish National Election’, *Scandinavian Political Studies* 45/3 (2022).

⁴¹ MIPEX, ‘MIPEX – Denmark’.

their countries of origin will genuinely be safe for return remains highly uncertain, leaving many in a state of prolonged insecurity and suspended belonging.

It is important to keep in mind that many aspects of Danish immigration law are only possible because Denmark has opted out of the EU's asylum policy.⁴² As a result, some of the measures are not an option for other EU member states. In fact, a controversial Danish policy, originally known as the 'ghetto law' but later rebranded as the 'parallel societies law', is now under scrutiny by the European Court of Justice.⁴³

Conclusion

Denmark's immigration and integration policies have evolved significantly over the past decades, shaped by both domestic challenges and political considerations. While the country has implemented a strict and structured approach to immigration, with a particular focus on labour market participation and self-sufficiency, the long-term success of these policies remains debated. On the one hand, Denmark has been praised for its ability to regulate migration flows, maintain social cohesion and ensure economic incentives drive integration. On the other hand, persistent disparities in employment, education and social mobility among non-Western immigrants and their descendants highlight the continued barriers to full inclusion in Danish society. Moreover, Denmark's opt-out from the EU asylum policy has allowed it to implement measures that other EU countries cannot, making its approach unique but also subject to legal and ethical scrutiny. As immigration remains a central issue in Danish politics, the long-term sustainability of these policies will depend on balancing restrictive

⁴² There have been discussions about the possibility of holding a referendum on Denmark's opt-out from EU immigration and asylum policies, but it is unlikely to take place any time soon.

⁴³ Introduced in 2018, this legislation evaluates neighbourhoods based on several factors: employment rates, crime levels, educational outcomes, welfare reliance and the percentage of non-Western inhabitants. Neighbourhoods that fall short in at least two of the first four criteria and have more than 50% non-Western residents are subject to government measures aimed at boosting integration. These measures can include promoting mixed residency or, failing that, demolishing buildings to pave the way for gentrification. On 13 February, the European Court of Justice suggested in a preliminary decision that the focus on non-Western residents might be discriminatory. Another frequently covered controversial practice is the rule that personal items of value can be confiscated from irregular migrants crossing the Danish border and used to fund the costs associated with asylum procedures and housing. These items can be anything worth more than €1,300, such as jewellery or watches.

measures with meaningful integration efforts, ensuring that both economic and social cohesion goals are met in an increasingly diverse society.

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