



*Q&A: Trending Issues on Migration*

## Back to its Roots:

### Why Do the Danish Social Democrats Want a More Restrictive Immigration Policy?

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- The Danish Social Democratic Party has been in government for most of the last one hundred years. Since the turn of the century, however, this has changed. The desire to win back voters, and the fragility of the Danish welfare system, are important reasons explaining why the Danish Social Democratic Party has adopted a restrictive new immigration policy in 2018.
- With this policy, the party seeks *to reduce the number of immigrants* coming to Denmark, *support refugees* outside Europe, and strengthen efforts to *integrate people* from non-Western countries already living in Denmark.
- Most controversially, it proposes that Denmark should establish reception centres outside of Europe. This therefore eliminates the possibility of applying for asylum in Denmark on a spontaneous basis. At the same time, Denmark will receive a number of refugees through a quota established by the United Nations.
- The new immigration policy of the Danish Social Democratic Party can be seen as a sign of an incipient revolt against the dominant liberal, pro-immigration discourse in many Social Democratic Parties in Europe.

## 1. What is the content of the new immigration policy?

With approximately a quarter of the popular vote, the Danish Social Democratic Party is the largest single party in the Danish Parliament. It has been in government for most of the last hundred years. Since the turn of the century, however, the party has only been in government once, from 2011 to 2015. An important reason is the liberal, pro-immigration<sup>1</sup> policy espoused by the party in recent decades. This policy has pushed many traditional Social Democratic working-class voters into the arms of the Danish People's Party with an immigration policy which is – at least rhetorically – much stricter.

The desire to win back voters from the Danish People's Party (and to a certain extent also from the Liberal Party) is one important reason why the Danish Social Democratic Party has adopted a new non-liberal immigration policy in 2018. The policy is 42-pages long, rather detailed and labelled: "Just and Realistic. An Immigration Policy that Gathers Denmark Together". It covers concrete proposals within three areas of policy concerning 1) the *reduction of the number of immigrants* coming to Denmark, 2) how to *help many more refugees* internationally outside of Europe with the same amount of money that is today spent on helping refugees in Denmark, and 3) a strengthened effort to *integrate people* from non-Western countries already living in Denmark.

1) *fewer immigrants* (p. 12 in the plan): According to the plan, Denmark should establish a reception centre outside Europe. Thus, the possibility of applying for asylum in Denmark on a spontaneous basis will be eliminated. Instead, spontaneous asylum seekers will be sent to the reception centres in North Africa where their cases will be handled. These reception centres will preferably be set up by Danish authorities in cooperation with

other European countries. This means that refugees will be able to apply for asylum in Denmark, but the case handling will take place at the reception centre. If they are granted asylum, they will be transferred to the UN which will give them protection in either a UN camp or locally in the country where the UN centre is situated. If they are not refugees but rather migrants, then they will be sent back to their home countries. At the same time, Denmark will receive a number of quota refugees, but only through the United Nations.

The Social Democratic Party also suggests a politically-decided limit on the number of non-Western foreigners that Denmark can receive each year. This limit should be based on how many newcomers Danish society is able to integrate. The aim of this "upper-limit" is that Denmark should regain control over the influx of people from non-Western countries.

According to the Social Democratic Party there should also be strict requirement for family reunifications to Denmark, especially for spouses. These requirements concern language, employment possibilities, and prior knowledge about Denmark. In addition, it is an obligation that incoming spouses work and contribute to Danish society.

A "repatriation reform" is also part of the Social Democratic plan. It must ensure that most rejected asylum seekers are sent back. Among other things, such a reform consists of the following elements: a) a special unit is to be established within the police forces with special competences for the repatriation of rejected asylum seekers, b) it must be established with massive counselling already when entering and seeking asylum, c) the possibility of financially supporting voluntary return should be granted prior to the final rejection of asylum, and d) Denmark should not provide development assistance to countries that refuse to accept their own nationals.

The Social Democratic Party also proposes that the Danish border control should be maintained as long as there is no control at the EU's external borders. At the same time, the party will work towards a reform of the Schengen cooperation

<sup>1</sup> By the phrase "liberal, pro-immigration policy" I mean a policy that accepts a relatively free flow of migrants and refugees into a country. It does not mean that there is fully free flow. In contrast, a "restrictive immigration policy" is a policy with a strong focus on limiting the number of refugees and immigrants let into a country in line with international conventions.

so that the individual countries can decide themselves for how much time they want to control their own borders.

In the case of cash social benefits, the Social Democratic Party wants to apply the principle that immigrants have to contribute before receiving Danish welfare benefits. Generally, the party is sceptical about the use of an earnings principle because it could be seen to conflict with the Social Democratic welfare model (cf. Esping-Andersen 1990), but in the present situation it is deemed a necessary modification. However, the free and equal access to welfare services such as medical care, schooling and elderly care is to be maintained. Lastly, the Social Democratic Party expects all foreigners in Denmark to contribute. This applies to temporary refugees also.

2) How to *help more refugees* (p. 22 in the plan): The Social Democratic Party proposes that the EU and the international community join forces to carry out a historic boost to help Africa, inspired by the "Marshall Plan" for Europe after World War II. At the same time, there must be a comprehensive reform of Danish development assistance within the current overall frame in order to focus it on Africa.

The overall *raison d'être* for this paradigm shift when combining development assistance with certain immigration objectives is both to pave the way for the new immigration policy in Denmark and to undermine the lucrative business model for human smugglers.

3) How *better to integrate people* from non-Western countries already living in Denmark (p. 31 in the plan): The Social Democratic Party suggests that a number of actions must be undertaken to tackle the parallel societies and strengthen efforts against social control. Among other things, children should automatically go to kindergartens. Family reunifications to the residential areas dominated by non-Westerners must be stopped. There is a need to reduce the number of schools where more than half of the pupils have a foreign background. Lastly, publicly employees should not stand alone in the struggle to stress that democracy is more important than religious considerations.

The Social Democratic Party suggests that immigrants receiving social cash benefits and integration benefits should be obliged to contribute by working at least 37 hours a week. There should also be a ban on using children as interpreters.

A Social Benefit Commission should be established and tasked with reviewing the implications of reduced benefits. The commission should seek to ensure through its recommendations that the consequences for children of non-working parents are minimised, that newcomers do not receive higher benefits than residents, and that there is the right balance between integration, participation in the labour market, living conditions etc. The Danish Social Democrats will introduce a children's package for families on integration benefits, which will ensure that children will be properly taken care of. And Danish Social Democrats will invest at least DKK 200 million (27 million EUR) annually in day care centres and schools in vulnerable residential areas.

The plan should ensure that residential areas and schools will become mixed over time. A ten year plan will ensure that no residential areas, schools or educational institutions in the future have more than a maximum of 30% non-Western immigrants and their descendants.

According to the Social Democratic Party, there should also be new initiatives to combat illegal labour markets. Among other things, most business owners should be made aware that the use of illegal labour could deprive them the right to operate. The authorities must have better control options. And penalties should be increased significantly.

The plan also suggests a number of initiatives that give better financial opportunities to people who want to return to their country of origin. For example, senior citizen should be informed that they can bring their public pension back with them if they give up their right to Danish residence.

In terms of criminality, Danish courts should expel more criminal foreigners to their home country. Denmark must challenge the possibilities in this regard through the Council of Europe concerning

the interpretations that come from the European Court of Human Rights. Increased police efforts must be allocated to fight gangs. The Social Democratic Party will introduce a bandwidth and make it punishable to recruit young people under 18 years to gangs. The possibility of establishing a social sanction system independent of courts and police should also be investigated. That might strengthen the preventative effort, mitigating social and educational problems in vulnerable residential areas.

## 2. Why has the Danish Social Democratic Party opted for this restrictive immigration policy?

The underlying cause of the new policy can be seen both in the excessive welfare system of Denmark as well as in the roots of the party history itself.

The policy argues that there is an immense challenge from continued immigration into Denmark from third world countries where relatively few people contribute relatively little through their work: "The challenge we are facing is not temporary. It is here to stay. It will put pressure on our welfare model, our low degree of inequality as well as on our way of living" (p. 4). "Our" in this key sentence of the plan both seems to mean "social democrats" (as they see themselves as the prime sponsors of the Danish welfare model) as well as "Danes" (as the majority of Danes support the Danish welfare model according to all opinion polls).

The argument behind this challenge is that the Danish welfare model is universalistic. This implies equal and free access to schooling, health services, pensions (the mere fact that you live in Denmark gives you the right to public pension schemes), elderly care, university education, etc. However, the universalistic welfare model presumes that "the great majority contributes" (through their work and taxes), "that we trust each other" and "that there is a high degree of safety". According to the Social Democratic Party's plan this means that foreigners are welcomed to contribute and "become part of society" (p. 11).

The key phrase mentioned repeatedly in the plan is that they should become "a part of Denmark," which means that they should work, accept Danish values, democracy, and gender equality.

Generally, the Danish welfare model is considered vulnerable to immigration. This is especially the case when too many arrive who are unable to provide for themselves and who are, therefore, seen through a socio-economic lens as "an expense for society" (p. 34). According to the Ministry of Finance (p. 11) the economic challenge of immigration from third world countries into Denmark costs the Danish state approximately DKK 34 billion (4.5 billion EUR) per year when taxes paid are compared with the cost of welfare services provided. This level of public spending is almost equivalent to the total cost of running the primary school system in Denmark. The calculation by the Ministry of Finance is important because this ministry is normally regarded as a credible, neutral institution when it comes to economic calculations.

The costs for the state of third-world immigration into Denmark do not distinguish between immigrants and refugees. In practice, there has until now been considerable overlap in the treatment of these two groups. Many refugees denied asylum have been allowed to stay, and asylum given to one person has often led to the arrival of a large family. An objective of the Social Democratic plan is to make a clear distinction between these two groups. Refugees should only be allowed in as UN quota refugees, and migrants should only be allowed in if they have specialized skills needed in the Danish labour market. The calculation of the costs of third world immigration does not mean that non-economic factors such as crime rates, cultural clashes, fear of terror, etc. do not also play a role for the policy U-turn of the Danish Social Democratic Party. However, the cost figures from the Ministry of Finance concerning immigration are seen as indisputable facts, and are mentioned repeatedly in the political debate on immigration policy.

As for the second argument, in the optics of the Danish Social Democratic Party, the present change in policy direction is also a change in the party's core philosophy, and should be seen

against a backdrop of broader policy developments going 30-40 years. Back then – as evidenced in the book *Welcome Mustafa* by Mattias Tesfaye – the Party's stance on immigration policy was very restrictive. It acted in accordance with the interests of the unskilled and skilled workers as reflected in the trade unions' position. At that time, it was mainly the employers' side that promoted a liberal immigration policy.

All that changed, however, from the early 1980s on. The Social Democratic Party supported a very liberal bill on refugees in 1983 put forward in the Danish Parliament by the then Liberal Conservative government. The policy change at this period in the Danish Social Democratic Party was due to several factors:

- the take-over of power in the party by the so-called 68-Generation;
- an international pro-immigration policy trend;
- a stronger stress on the pure international aspects of social democracy at the cost of the national interests;
- a Danish UN commissioner for refugees (Poul Hartling) 1978 through 1985 meant that Danish politicians felt an obligation to be more open.

Because of these developments, the traditional scepticism towards a liberal or laissez-faire immigration policy (including refugee policy) changed. Due to the Refugee Act of 1983, refugees and immigrants became the same subject because very few refugees were sent back even if denied asylum, and for many years they could bring family members to Denmark with few restrictions. As a result, whereas in 1980 only 1 per cent of the Danish population had non-Western origin, the figure today stands at 8 per cent. This change of population has happened in less than a generation (p. 4 in the Social Democratic plan). To counter the effects of this, the new policy of 2018 can in this respect be seen as the party returning to its origins.

### 3. How can the policy be assessed?

The new immigration policy plan from the Danish Social Democratic Party can be seen as a sign of

an incipient revolt against the dominant liberal, pro-immigration discourse in many Social Democratic Parties in Europe, which are often driven by this issue. What is new in the plan of the Danish Social Democratic Party is that it offers a justification of a policy U-turn that is seemingly perceived as solid and coherent. It offers international solutions, is founded in the historic roots and ideology of the party, and is in line with the preferences of its potential working class voters. Inside the party, it is not seen as a sell-out to other political ideologies.

Nevertheless, the plan received also strong criticism, especially concerning the restriction of asylum and the reception centres in North Africa. It has also been questioned whether the Social Democratic plan is within the framework of international convention; the Social democrats strongly argue it is and should be. However, it has been pointed out that it may be difficult to guarantee asylum seekers their rights in accordance with international conventions when case handling takes place in a North African country. The party's response has been that the reception in North Africa will and should do the case handling in accordance with international conventions, and that this will be an essential part of the agreement when setting up the centres.

On the other hand, the plan promises to regain control over the number of migrants allowed into the country. It combines national and international efforts in a new way. The immigration policy is now seen from a holistic perspective. It is full of concrete ideas and proposals which will probably – to some extent – be implemented in Denmark.

Social Democratic parties all across Europe are in deep trouble, and some have been diminished considerably during recent elections. Their inability to deal with the immigration issue seems to be an important explanatory factor. In that respect, it is important to be open-minded and not to be caught by preconceived ideas about how to set immigration policies.

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