

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

CAUTIONARY TALE OR MODEL FOR SUCCESS?

Social Democrats and their Migration Policy
in Denmark

Jakob Schwörer and Kristina Birke Daniels
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Contrary to widespread public opinion, the »paradigm shift« in Danish migration policy has not weakened the radical right. The Social Democrats' tactic of adopting right-wing positions has not proved successful and indeed is creating new problems.



Voters' shift from the radical right to the Social Democrats was not primarily motivated by attitudes towards migration policy.



There is no evidence that the number of people seeking protection and the number of repatriations have changed significantly as a result of the much vaunted »paradigm shift«. However, the consequences for those seeking protection are devastating and make integration more difficult.

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A MODEL FOR SUCCESS OR A CAUTIONARY TALE? SOCIAL DEMOCRATS AND THEIR MIGRATION POLICY IN DENMARK

1 INTRODUCTION

In public discourse in Germany, but also internationally, Danish asylum and migration policy is often seen as a possible model for other countries (Aftonbladet 2024; Cwejman 2022; Junginger 2023; Lewisohn 2024; Pohl 2023; Turnowsky/Fisser 2023; Wäschenbach 2023), despite the fact that other EU countries – unlike Denmark – are bound by EU legal standards in migration policy that make the implementation of similar policies more difficult (at least for the time being). In particular, it is argued that the Danish approach has helped to push back radical right-wing parties, strengthen the Social Democrats and reduce immigration. However, there is no solid evidence for any of these three assumptions. In this article we will focus primarily on the first two points, and also address the consequences for those seeking protection, who are often neglected in such discussions.

2 INTEGRATION AND IMMIGRATION POLICY IN DENMARK: THE PARADIGM SHIFT

Denmark has continuously tightened its immigration and integration policies since the turn of the millennium (European Commission 2020; Feith Tan 2021; Rytter et al. 2023). The implementation of more restrictive policies began when the liberal-conservative minority government took office in 2001 with the support of the radical right Danish People's Party. In 2010, permanent residence was made conditional on employment. In the same year, the controversial "ghetto list" was introduced, ostensibly to address the problem of segregation in Danish neighbourhoods. Regardless of the economic causes of the local concentration of certain groups, this list directly linked poverty, crime and social exclusion to the origins of people from countries in the Global South (Olsen/Larsen 2023). Even today, being of so-called "non-Western" origin is considered a "ghetto indicator", which diverts attention from the many forms of systemic discrimination that people in these neighbourhoods face, including poorer educational and labour market opportunities, and repression on the part of the authorities (Söderberg 2024).

In 2015, Denmark set a precedent in Europe by introducing a new type of temporary protection status for refugees, particularly from Syria. This protection status is considered

particularly onerous. The controversial decision by the then Minister for Integration Inger Støjberg (then of the liberal Venstre party) to separate 23 Syrian couples who had applied for asylum in Denmark when accommodating them was also taken during this period. In fact, she was later sentenced to a short prison term for this decision (Turnowsky 2021). There have also been positive developments in integration policy, such as visible successes in the labour market integration of refugees and migrants before 2019, but these have largely been ignored and politicians scarcely talk about them (Bredgaard 2020; Rytter et al. 2023).

A significant part of Denmark's current migration policy can be traced back to a law of 2019, since known as the "paradigm shift", which focuses on an exclusively temporary protection status (Rytter et al. 2023). This type of status, which was first introduced in 2015 but then affected "only" a minority of refugees, was thus extended to all protection seekers. A permanent residence permit can now be applied for after eight years at the earliest, and (insecure) residence status can be withdrawn even before expiry for many asylum seekers if the Danish authorities assess the situation in their country of origin to have become slightly less problematic (often in defiance of the assessment of international organisations). The main aim of this policy is to deter future asylum seekers and to send refugees back as soon as possible. The term "integration" has been replaced by "self-sufficiency and return". Since 2019, for example, the protection status of more than 1,000 refugees from Damascus has been re-examined and in more than a hundred cases revoked, without taking family circumstances into account.

This paradigm shift was supported by the then opposition Social Democrats (*Socialdemokraterne*), even though the law did not require their backing in order to pass. After the Social Democrats returned to government in 2019, they continued their hard line against refugees and migrants from the Global South, even after the new centrist government was formed in 2022. In addition, the Social Democratic government (2019–2022) planned to set up asylum centres outside Denmark to which refugees already in Denmark would be transferred. In particular, Rwanda was discussed, but the project was put on hold in early 2023 and such centres are now to be set up within the EU (The Local 2023; Ministry of Foreign Affairs Denmark 2022). The fundamentally anti-immigration course with the professed goal of "zero immigration" remains in place.

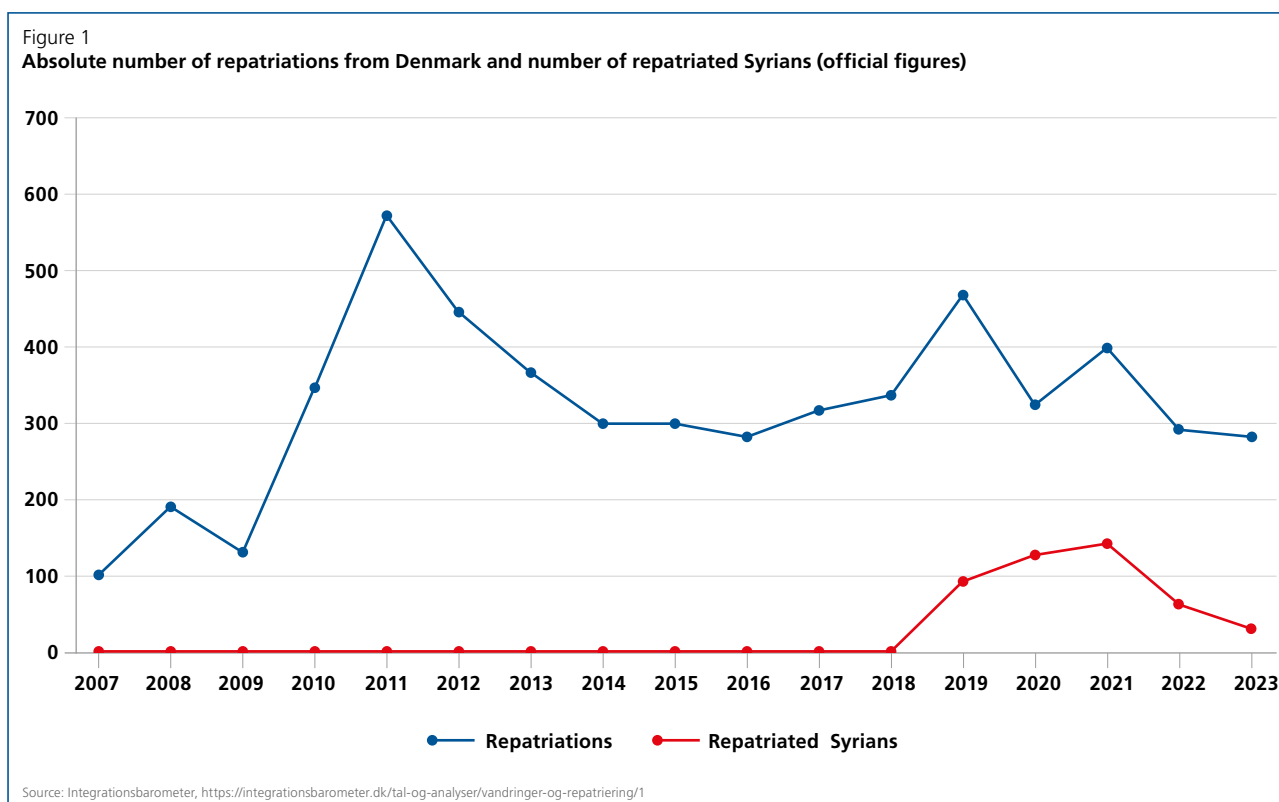
However, there is little evidence that the harsh migration and integration policies have actually led to more repatriations and fewer asylum applications, although the Danish Social Democrats repeatedly make this claim (Rytter et al. 2023). In fact, no particular trend in repatriations has been observed since the paradigm shift in 2019, with the exception of the particularly controversial deportations to Syria, which rose sharply at a time when Syrians were no longer protected from being returned to their war-torn country (see Figure 1). More recently, these numbers, too, have fallen slightly again. However, one direct consequence of the new legislation appears to be that asylum seekers and refugees are having their residence status revoked or not renewed more often. This usually does not result in these individuals returning to their country, but rather they simply disappear from sight (Bendixen 2021). It is suspected that some of them move on to Sweden or Germany, but the authorities do not know where these people are. The new Danish migration policy thus contributes to illegality.

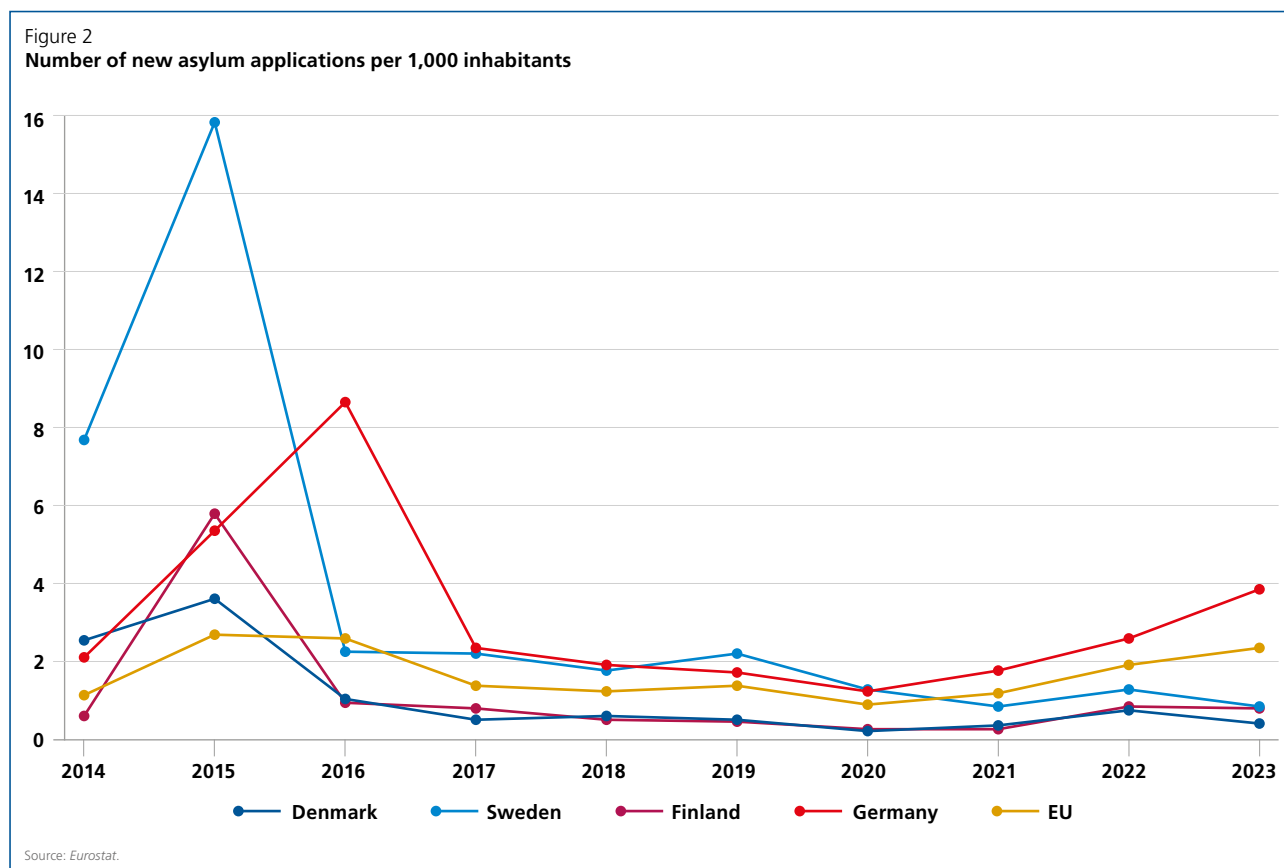
While it is true that the number of new asylum applications in Denmark has decreased significantly since 2015 (but less so after the paradigm shift in 2019), a comparison with the other Nordic countries (which still have less restrictive migration policies than Denmark) shows that this is not a phenomenon specific to Denmark but is influenced by other factors (such as the Covid-19 pandemic or international crises such as Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine – see Figure 2).¹

The fact that the development of asylum-seeker numbers in Denmark is not particularly striking compared with other countries can also be explained by the state of migration research. In principle, pull factors such as a country’s economic attractiveness are considered to be less relevant for the choice of destination country for those seeking protection. As a result, deterrent measures such as cuts in social spending in destination countries are not particularly effective. In a comprehensive review of the literature, James and Mayblin (2016) concluded that states themselves have little influence on the attractiveness of their country: “The pull factors that draw asylum-seekers to destination countries [...] have much less to do with state policy and much more to do with factors such as the presence of social networks and the history of colonialism.” A recent empirical study based on Eurostat data comes to the same conclusion (Di Iasio/Wahba 2024). The most important pull factor is the existence of social networks in the country of destination, while supposed deterrent measures such as work bans or cuts in financial support (which have also been implemented in Denmark) have little effect on asylum flows. A study published in 2013 by the German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, which was based on interviews with experts, came to very similar conclusions (Scholz 2013). Most asylum-seekers go to places where they already have contacts and connections. In addition, so-called “smugglers” often influence the level of information available to protection seekers and their choice of destination country.

1 The EU–Turkey agreement is occasionally blamed for the decline in numbers. However, this is controversial in migration research, as the numbers were already falling long before the agreement was

implemented and other factors also play a role (see Haferlach / Kurban 2017; Van Liempt et al. 2017).





3 THE DANISH SOCIAL DEMOCRATS AND IMMIGRATION: A STRATEGY FOR SUCCESS?

The clear shift to the right in the Danish Social Democrats' asylum and migration policy began in 2015 at the latest, with the election of Mette Frederiksen as party leader. However, the party had already adopted a much tougher tone on migration policy during Helle Thorning-Schmidt's 2015 election campaign. Within a short period of time, the party adopted a distinctly anti-immigration profile that, according to political scientists, already had 'nativist' traits (Meret 2021; Schwörer 2024; Wiggen 2023). Nativism is considered the core ideology of the radical right, which espouses a culturally homogeneous nation state in which 'non-native' elements are seen as posing some sort of danger to the native population (Mudde 2007). Mette Frederiksen, for example, posited a threat in the religious and cultural beliefs of 'non-Western' immigrants, as she indicated in an article in the IPG Journal in 2019 (Frederiksen 2019).

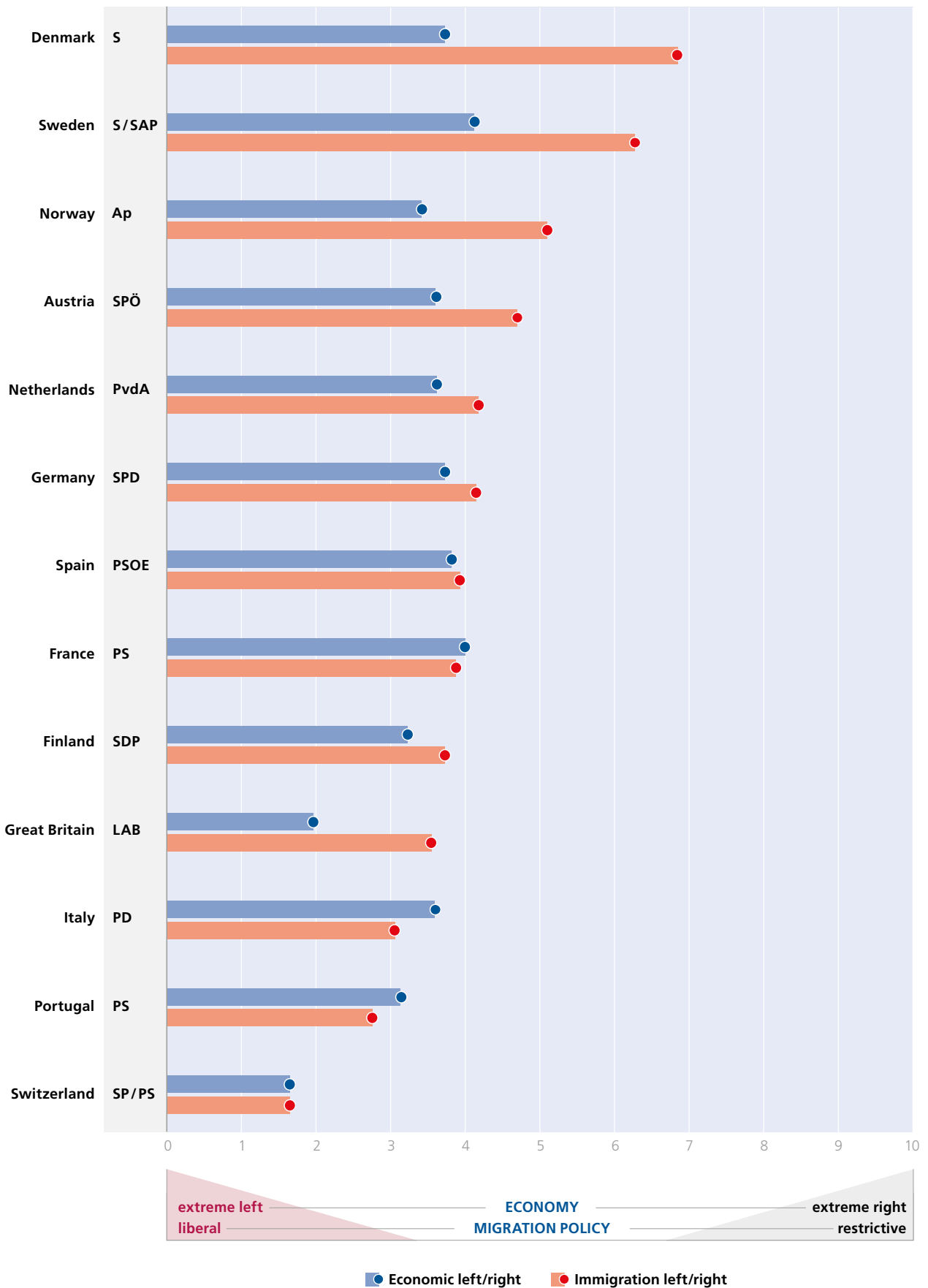
Among Western European Social Democratic parties, the Danish Social Democrats have been the most critical of immigration in 2019 (most recent data), followed by the Swedish and Norwegian Social Democrats (see Figure 3). Shortly after taking over as party leader, Frederiksen signalled her openness to cooperating with the radical right Danish People's Party (Dansk Folkeparti, DF). Frederiksen presented the idea of a cross-party alliance (including the DF) at the 2016 party conference. This idea was raised even more frequently in the following years (Meret 2021).

THE 2019 ELECTIONS AS THE SOURCE OF THE MYTH ...

The 2019 national elections are often cited as evidence of the supposed success of the Danish Social Democrats' new direction. The Social Democrats campaigned in these elections with a combination of left-wing economic policies and restrictive immigration policies and according to CHES data, the party was clearly on the immigration-sceptical spectrum (see Figure 4). The party lost fewer votes than had been expected (election result: 25.9 per cent). The radical right DF, on the other hand, lost over 12 per cent of its share of the vote, and almost 10 per cent of former DF voters switched to the Social Democrats (Jupskås 2019). A closer look at the election data, however, shows that the switching of DF voters in the 2019 elections was due mainly to the Social Democrats' more left-wing orientation on economic and social issues. In particular, the Social Democrats did not reach DF voters who were particularly critical of immigration (Etzerodt/Kongshøj 2022²; McManus/Falkenbach 2022). The issue of immigration could not be completely neutralised, so that DF voters with particularly hostile attitudes to immigration remained loyal to their party (Etzerodt/Kongshøj 2022). It was primarily the Social Democrats' positioning on economic and social policy that was the main factor behind the voter migration, while the restrictive stance on migration in turn cost votes

² Factors such as age, gender and income had no significant influence on the migration of DF voters to the Social Democrats (Etzerodt / Kongshøj 2022).

Figure 3
Comparison of the positioning of Social Democratic parties in Western Europe on immigration and on the economic left-right axis (2019)



Source: Chapel Hill Expert Survey (Jolly et al. 2022).

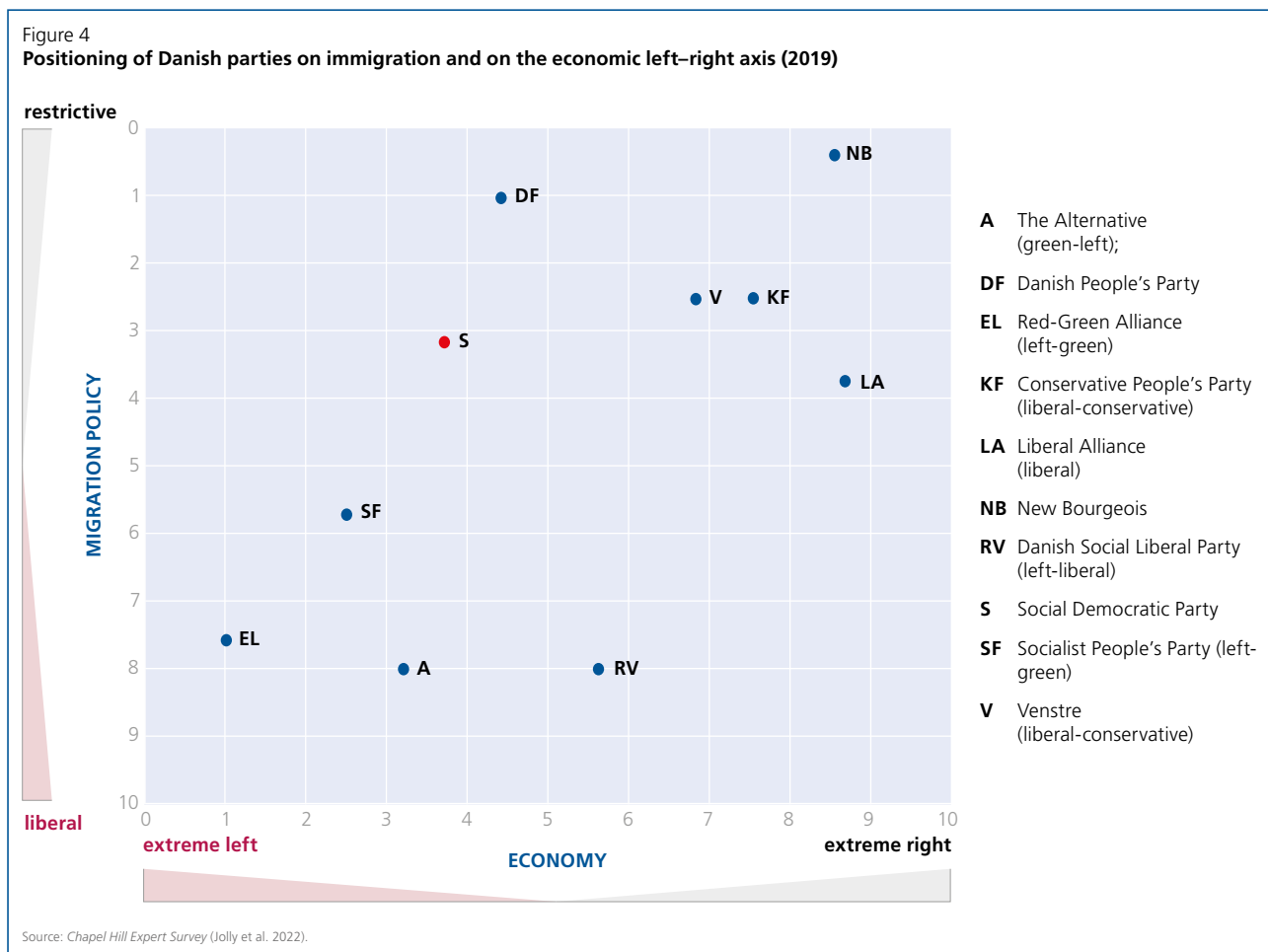


Table 1
Most important issues for the Danish population during and shortly after the 2019 and 2022 election campaigns

	Election 2019 (7 May)		Election 2022 (1 November)	
	December 2018 (SEB 90)	June 2019 (SEB 91)	June/July 2022 (SEB 97)	Jan./Feb. 2023 (SEB 98)
Environmental, climate and energy issues	37%	54%	58%	50%
Health and social security	35%	40%	18%	35%
Immigration	30%	24%	7%	4%
Education	16%	16%	4%	8%
Taxes	13%	12%	1%	3%
Rising prices/inflation	5%	4%	56%	44%
Terrorism	8%	4%	1%	1%
State of the economy	6%	6%	14%	12%

Source: Eurobarometer.

in the left-wing camp and resulted in the loss of voters to the Social Liberals (Radikale Venstre, RV) (McManus and Falkenbach 2022).

Another explanation for the migration from DF to the Social Democrats is the former's unclear position on climate and environmental issues (Jupskås 2019; Vihma et al. 2021), which were particularly important in the 2019 election. According to Eurobarometer data (see Table 1), climate, environment and energy were among the top two issues for a relative majority of Danes in 2019 (and also in 2022), followed by health care and social security (2022: inflation).³ The Social Democrats thus benefited from the fact that their core issues, such as energy, social security and price development, but also education (2019) were particularly important to the voters. DF's decision in 2015 to refrain from participating in government, which the then party leader Kristian Thulesen Dahl later described as a mistake (Berlingske 2019), is also occasionally cited as an explanation for the poor election result (Jupskås 2022).

... AND DISILLUSIONMENT IN THE COALITION WITH THE LIBERAL-CONSERVATIVE PARTIES

In 2022, the Social Democrats once again emerged as the strongest party (+1.6 per cent), with a programme similar to the one it ran on in 2019. The party's core issues remained salient for the population in 2022 (climate/energy, price increases, health and social security), not least because of the consequences of Russia's invasion of Ukraine (Jupskås 2022). The Social Democrats benefited from their expansion of welfare services during their last legislative period and from their management of the Covid-19 pandemic. At the same time, there were internal crises and conflicts in the centre-right parties, which led to a miserable result for the liberal Venstre party under Jakob Ellemann-Jensen (-10.1 per cent).

In an unusual development for Denmark, however, the Social Democrats formed a grand coalition across party lines with the Venstre party and the new centre-right Moderates in 2022. Mette Frederiksen had already hinted at this change of alliance in a speech in 2016, in which she spoke out against building traditional left-right blocs (Meret 2021). Consequently, the Social Democrats were unable to continue their progressive economic and social policies and were forced to move further to the right on social and economic issues. Since the 2022 elections, the Social Democrats have continuously lost support in the polls. In the 2024 European elections, the party achieved historically its worst result (15.4 per cent), for the first time falling behind the green-left Socialist People's Party.

Thus, the Social Democrats have not been able to benefit from their shift towards a restrictive migration rhetoric and policy. Moreover, they were hardly able to win over anti-immigration voters from the radical right, although this scenario is more likely in Denmark than elsewhere because of the ideological proximity between Social Democratic and DF voters on socio-economic issues (Etzerodt/Kongshøj 2022). Rather, the Social Democrats' moderate electoral successes seem to be due to the sharpening of their economic and social policy profile. Despite this observation, the party has recently gone even further than a hard line on immigration.

In early 2024, a Social Democratic MP gave a speech in the Danish parliament claiming that people from a certain ethnic background were trying to infiltrate the public administration and private and state institutions (Barrett 2024). The central message of his speech was that one must be vigilant even if people of certain cultural groups are employed and have not been convicted of any crimes, because such people may still undermine Danish society from within. Despite criticism from local Social Democratic politicians, the party leadership demonstratively backed the MP and his statements.

POLITICAL SCIENCE ASSESSMENT OF THE "ACCOMMODATION STRATEGY"

Political scientists have warned that mainstream parties do not benefit from adopting nativist and anti-immigration positions, and that radical right parties are not weakened by such accommodation strategies (Krause et al. 2023). Häusermann et al. (2022) also show that the right-wing voter potential for Social Democratic parties in Western Europe is very limited because their electorates are too far apart ideologically (including on migration issues). Over the past two decades, Social Democrats have lost only a small number of votes to the radical right. They have lost significantly more to green, left-wing and centrist parties or to non-voters. In Germany, too, empirical studies suggest (Lewandowsky/Wagner 2023) that the majority of AfD voters appear to be largely unreceptive to other parties based on simple changes in discourse or position. Rather, Abou-Chadi et al. (2024) show on the basis of surveys in six Western European countries that the 'winning formula' for social democratic parties is left-wing economic policy, which is particularly important for large sections of the working class (who at the same time find cultural issues such as migration less relevant), combined with a liberal-progressive stance on migration and cultural issues, which is particularly important for social democratic voters from the educated middle class.

The Danish experience supports the arguments put forward by political scientists such as Polacko (2022), Benedetto et al. (2020), Abou-Chadi et al. (2024), Krause et al. (2023), Loxbo et al. (2021) and Gingrich (2017) that Social Democratic parties should emphasise their traditional issues of welfare and redistribution in order to be successful at the

³ Data from the European Commission's Eurobarometer, <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/about/other>.

ballot box. Moreover, data from the 2019 European Election Study show that, although it is true that voters who had voted DF in the previous election but opted for the Social Democrats in 2019 are more sceptical about immigration than the party’s “core voters” (Etzerodt/Kongshøj, 2022), the majority of Social Democratic voters in Denmark do not support extremely restrictive immigration policies (McManus/Falkenbach, 2022).

One challenge of the Danish Social Democrats’ new strategy is the need for strong internal party discipline. Interviews with party officials have shown that by no means all of them agree with the current course. Local politicians in particular have voiced criticisms (Meret 2021). Although Frederiksen has been able to build support for her strategy on the back of relatively good results in the past two elections, the lack of electoral success that is currently on the cards could undermine internal party discipline.

4 THE CONSEQUENCES FOR THE RADICAL RIGHT-WING PARTY LANDSCAPE

For a brief time, it seemed that the radical right in Denmark would largely disintegrate with the DF. However, new radical right players quickly managed to win over DF’s existing potential voters. In June 2022, Inger Stø-

bjerg, former Minister for Immigration of the Venstre party, who had been sentenced to a short prison term for a decision she took while in office, founded the populist radical right Denmark Democrats (DD). Another populist radical right party, the New Right (*Nye Borgerlige* or New Bourgeois) party had been founded in 2015 by former members of the Conservative People’s Party (KF). While the radical right together received around 11 per cent of the vote in 2019, their 2022 election result improved to almost 15 per cent, enabling all three parties to enter the national parliament. With the exception of the 2015 elections, the radical right in Denmark has never been as strong as it is today, according to current opinion polls (see Figure 5).

The crisis of the Danish People’s Party has therefore not led to a decline of right-wing radicalism in Denmark. Instead, there is now a much wider range of options for voters with nativist and authoritarian attitudes (Jupskås 2022). DF, which has not yet disappeared from the scene, combines nativism with a left-leaning, welfare chauvinist profile, while the New Right (NB), currently in a severe internal crisis, shares DF’s nativism but offers its voters neo-liberal economic policies. The Denmark Democrats, currently the most successful radical right party in the country, combine nativist positions with an agrarian populism that pits the urban elites against the “hard-working” rural population.

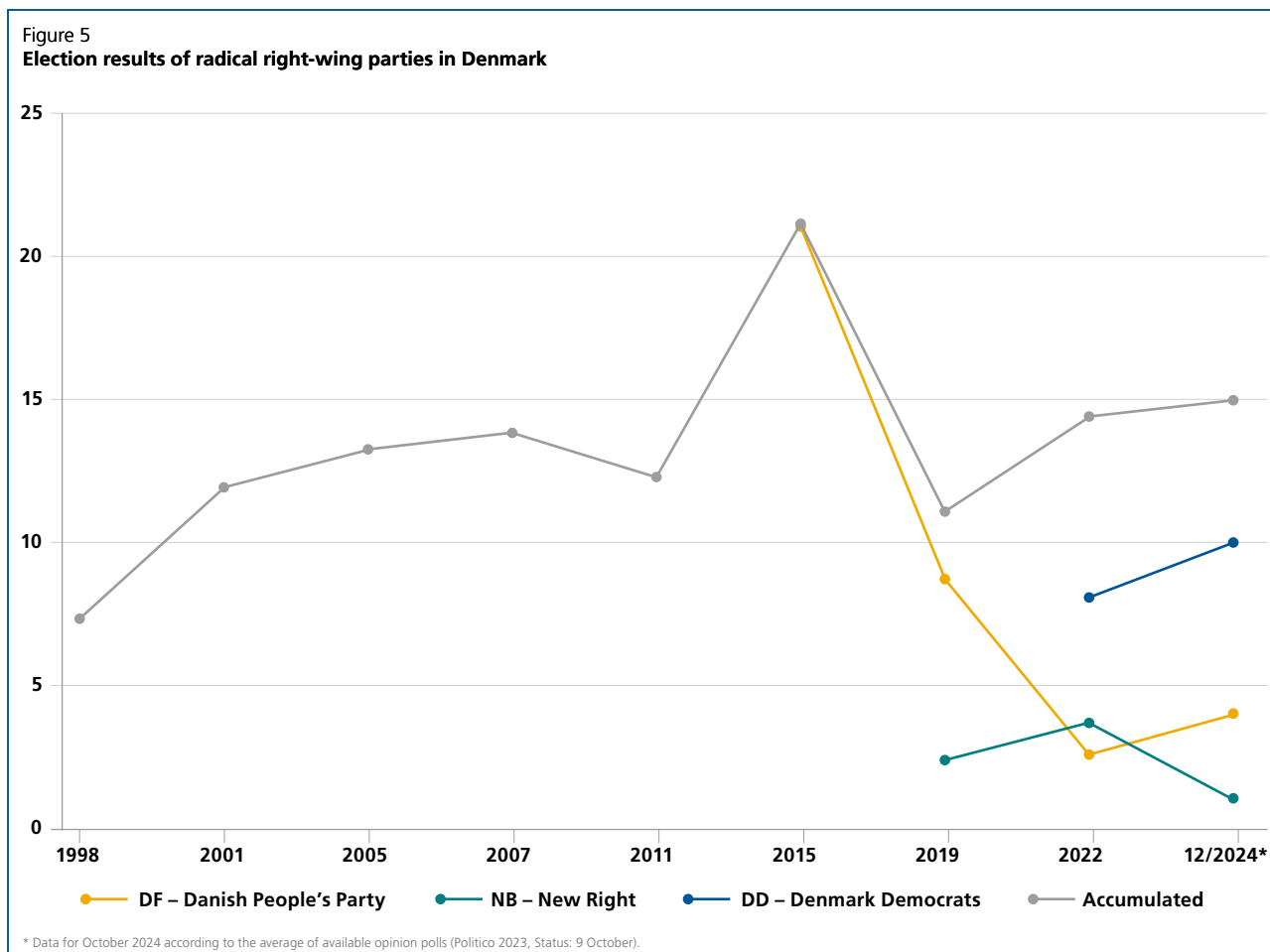


Table 2
Denmark's position in the "worst country ranking" with regard to a welcoming culture (Expat Insider Survey)

	Difficulties settling in	Not feeling welcome	Local unfriendliness	Difficulty making friends
2014	4	7	8	3
2015	7	11	16	5
2016	3	4	8	1
2017	1	4	7	2
2018	5	5	8	3
2019	2	3	2	1
2021	3	5	3	2
2022	6	8	8	5
2023	3	4	3	1

Note: Darker tones indicate a higher ranking.
Source: Expat Insider Survey.

5 CONSEQUENCES FOR PROTECTION SEEKERS

In addition to hostile public opinion towards protection seekers and people from the Global South, the "paradigm shift" in particular has far-reaching consequences for the lives of these people. This state of affairs has been sharply criticised by the Council of Europe and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, among others (Council of Europe 2023; UNHCR 2021). Vitus and Jarlby (2022) already concluded in their 2017 study that insecure residency status hinders integration. This has been exacerbated by the paradigm shift, which introduced temporary residence status as the norm (Bredgaard 2020; Rytter et al. 2023). Qualitative interviews with refugee women revealed a direct link between the new legislation introduced with the paradigm shift and suicide attempts (Liversage 2023).

Suárez-Krabbe and Lindberg (2019) speak of a system that deliberately criminalises migrants, institutionalises racist practices (such as deportation camps) and aims to make the lives of migrants as unbearable as possible. This particularly affects refugees, but also people from the Global South, who are considered a risk factor in Denmark solely on the basis of their origins. The "ghetto law", for example, provides for the forced relocation of people of "non-Western origin" if they are considered to be too highly concentrated in a neighbourhood (Olsen/Larsen 2023).

Refugees in particular are under great pressure. On one hand, they are expected to integrate as quickly as possible,

find work and participate in appropriate integration programmes. On the other hand, even substantial progress in integration does not protect them from losing their precarious protection status. Refugees must therefore integrate into Danish society while also preparing for their return to their country of origin (Rytter et al. 2023). Case workers who work with refugees are now legally obliged to encourage them to leave the country, while at the same time ensuring that those seeking protection integrate into Danish society. The basic message seems to be something along the lines of "we don't want you, but please integrate". Furthermore, this system has many unintended consequences, for example for women subjected to domestic violence. It is more difficult for them to divorce a violent husband because their protection status is often linked to his (individual protection status for women is usually even more precarious). On top of that, if they return to the country from which they fled they can expect to face stigma and violence if they divorce (Liversage 2023).

6 POSSIBLE CONSEQUENCES FOR "DESIRED" IMMIGRATION

While the Danish government is trying to make life as difficult as possible for those seeking protection, the country is at the same time dependent on immigration because of its demographic challenges. In the first three months of 2022, for example, 42 per cent of Danish companies reported problems recruiting staff. There is a particular shortage of skilled workers in the fields of science, tech-

nology, health care, education, IT and finance (Symons 2023). While Denmark has recently made it easier for companies to hire workers from non-EU countries by lowering minimum wage requirements, expanding the fast-track work permit process, and “opening up” jobs to foreigners, foreign workers continue to face a hostile environment in the country, which may also affect future recruitment of skilled workers.

The InterNations organisation conducts an annual worldwide Expat Insider Survey among expatriates (InterNations 2023). It is not representative, but the online survey is completed mainly by people with a university degree from the InterNations community (on average 153 people per year), which allows conclusions to be drawn about skilled workers.⁴ Denmark scores well in terms of work–life balance and material factors, which is likely to be the main reason skilled workers choose to work there. However, the study also includes an “ease of settling in” index, which contains the subcategories “Feeling welcome”, “Local friendliness” and “Finding new friends”. Since the survey began in 2014, Denmark has regularly been ranked near the bottom.

Table 2 shows Denmark’s ranking in the respective categories based on a “worst country ranking” (in other words, third place means that this country has the third worst feeling factor of all countries from the sample). While up until 2018 Denmark was at least not ranked bottom when it came to the friendliness of local people, this has changed slightly since 2019. Now Denmark is almost at the bottom of the league in this category as well. Although one has to be careful about blaming the paradigm shift for this, it cannot be denied that foreign workers do not feel welcome in Denmark. While Denmark is generally attractive in terms of material factors and working conditions, when it comes to competition for skilled workers a welcoming culture can also play a role.

Empirical evidence suggests a correlation between restrictive asylum policies and rhetoric on the one hand, and the attractiveness of a country for skilled foreign workers on the other (Di Iasio / Wahba 2023). In the words of migration researcher Judith Kohlenberger (2024: 4), this means that “Promoting ‘wanted’ migration only works in tandem with an overall welcome culture and a proimmigration stance, regardless of the migration category”.

7 CONCLUSION

Nativist-authoritarian discourses and legislation have become part of mainstream politics in Denmark. Indeed, Denmark is one of the pioneers of what might be called “*nativist mainstreaming*” (Schwörer 2024). The Social Democrats have not only tolerated this development, but have actively taken it up in government. In this framing, immi-

gration is seen exclusively as a danger to the Danish welfare state, culture and national security. This shift to the right by the Social Democrats can hardly be linked to the weakening of the radical right Danish People’s Party in 2019, however, as is often claimed. Rather, the Social Democrats benefited from a clear left-wing profile in terms of social and economic policy, which they were unable to pursue further in their governing coalition with the (economic) liberal-conservative parties. Since then, the Social Democrats have been on an electoral downward spiral.

Mainstream parties that have pursued a short-sighted anti-immigration course will find it difficult to rid themselves of the forces they have unleashed. By normalising nativist thinking, the Danish Social Democrats have made it increasingly difficult to restore humane asylum and integration policies, even if the political will exists. This strategy has also failed to neutralise the radical right. Instead, what was once the right-wing fringe has multiplied and become more successful overall.

Denmark has started to deport people to Syria, but there appears to be no general link between the introduction of the paradigm shift, on one hand, and the number of asylum seekers and repatriations, on the other. There is no evidence in the Danish case for the dubious model of the “pull” mechanism, on the basis of which Danish policymakers seek to use deterrence as a solution to asylum immigration.

The consequences of the “paradigm shift” are devastating for refugees. They include increasing precariousness and insecurity, making it impossible to plan for the future and even leading to suicide attempts. Integration has become almost impossible, as the paradigm shift legislation has almost eliminated the long-term prospect of becoming part of Danish society. The perspective of those affected by the paradigm shift plays only a subordinate role, if any, in political discourse.

Furthermore, there’s a reasonable chance that highly qualified individuals seeking work in Europe will be deterred by the climate in Denmark. While Denmark’s working conditions and wage levels offer considerable attractions to highly qualified specialists, it is at the bottom of the league when it comes to its culture of welcoming foreign workers, at least in the subjective perception of those affected. Although we could not provide hard evidence that the “paradigm shift” and the adverse discursive shift of mainstream parties have reduced the number of highly skilled migrants, Denmark needs more immigration, including from ‘non-Western’ countries and so has reason for concern.

In our view, there is no good reason to adopt the strategy of the Danish Social Democrats, either from a normative or an electoral point of view. It has not contributed to their electoral success and it has not weakened the radical right. And if that wasn’t enough, it undermines the rights of people seeking protection from war and persecution and stigmatises people from the Global South. Far from a model for suc-

⁴ Number of surveys completed by expatriates in Denmark (according to InterNations): 2014: 158; 2015: 169; 2016: 143; 2017: 152; 2018: 146; 2019: 186; 2020: 177; 2021: 125; 2022: 128; 2023: 141.

cess, the rightward turn of the Danish Social Democrats stands much more as a cautionary tale.

But even if the goal of weakening the radical right by adopting its positions had been achieved, one might well ask what is the point of a Social Democratic party that abandons the principles of human rights and international law for purely electoral reasons. The Danish Social Democrats are moving towards ethnic nationalism and currently violating international laws such as the Geneva Convention on Refugees and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This can isolate Denmark in the international community. A Social Democratic party that adopts nativist approaches and abandons its core values of solidarity, inclusion, and social justice for conservative-reactionary ideas of deportation and hostility to foreigners will be unable to develop its own positive vision for the future. The “any way the wind blows” approach has failed – and not only in Denmark – and should not be adopted as a model under any circumstances. Instead, Social Democrats should be drawing attention to genuinely Social Democratic issues and practising solidarity with people of different origins and cultures.

NOTE

FES Nordics will publish an anthology on the consequences of the Danish paradigm shift in early 2025. The book will outline the consequences for protection seekers, refugee women in Denmark, the number of asylum applications and the party system, and will also address the so-called “ghetto legislation”.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Jakob Schwörer is Policy Advisor for Foreign Policy, Peace and Security in the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's Regional Office for the Nordic Countries in Stockholm.

Kristina Birke Daniels is the Director of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's Regional Office for the Nordic Countries in Stockholm.

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Responsible:
Kristina Birke Daniels | Director | FES Nordic Countries
Phone: +46 768 486 705
<https://nordics.fes.de>

Contact/Orders: Jakob.Schwoerer@fes.de

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CAUTIONARY TALE OR MODEL FOR SUCCESS? Social Democrats and their migration policy in Denmark



The asylum and immigration policy of the Danish Social Democrats, which is largely responsible for the restrictive immigration and integration policy in Denmark, is often seen as a possible model for other countries. The widespread belief that the Danish Social Democrats' shift to the right in 2015 and 2019 has both strengthened them and weakened the radical right does not hold up under closer scrutiny.



The party's hardline position on immigration was not the decisive factor in the migration of moderate voters from the radical right Danish People's Party to the Social Democrats in 2019. In polls conducted in 2024, the radical right receives almost as much support as the Danish People's Party did in its heyday. In fact, the main reason the Social Democrats increased their share of the vote in 2019 was their progressive economic, social and climate policies. Having said that, since it entered into coalition with the (economic) liberal/conservative parties the party is no longer able to implement these policies and is now losing significant support. Its increasingly nativist stance on immigration and integration cannot halt the current electoral decline.



The flow of asylum-seekers into Denmark hardly differs from that in other Nordic countries. But the consequences of the Social Democrats' migration and integration policies are devastating for those seeking protection. The hostile social climate facing immigrants to Denmark from the Global South could also have consequences for the immigration of desired skilled workers.

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