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Immigrants in Denmark: Past, present, and future

Bonor Ayamem

Denmark has a reputation for being a liberal and tolerant country in regard to its treatment of certain marginalized groups. However, a close study of social and political documentation reveals that this treatment has not historically applied to immigrants and people of color, in particular black and brown Muslim immigrants. This article performs such a study and investigates claims of Denmark's egalitarianism through an analysis of its history and economy.

Introduction

Owing to its extensive tax-financed welfare programs as well as its progressive positions on gender and wealth equality, Denmark is widely considered one of the most egalitarian countries in the world across several metrics. In 2021, Denmark was the most gender equal country according to the Gender Inequality Index (Statista, 2022); and, according to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Denmark scores among the lowest in income inequality and relative poverty rates globally (OECD, 2021). Despite this commitment to equality, tolerance, and social security for all people, Denmark still harbors some prejudice and biases against immigrants, in particular those from non-Western backgrounds. In her article discussing cultural racism in Denmark, Karen Wren (2001) writes that a fundamental shift in Denmark during the early 1980s has led it to be potentially one of the most racist countries in Europe.

This article attempts to organize and make sense of a complicated history of anti-immigration and anti-multiculturalism that is paradoxical to the liberal and tolerant Danish state. One goal of the discussion that follows is to locate the source, context, and reasoning of these sentiments and further investigate them through political, cultural, and economic lenses. Additionally, in examining economic anti-immigration arguments, this article takes the arguments against immigration and claims of its net harm to the Danish welfare economy into serious account. These arguments notwithstanding, this article seeks to provide alternative thought and offer opportunities for further research in order to imagine a future that integrates immigrants into Danish economy and society in a way that provides net positive outcomes for the immigrants themselves and the Danish state as a whole.

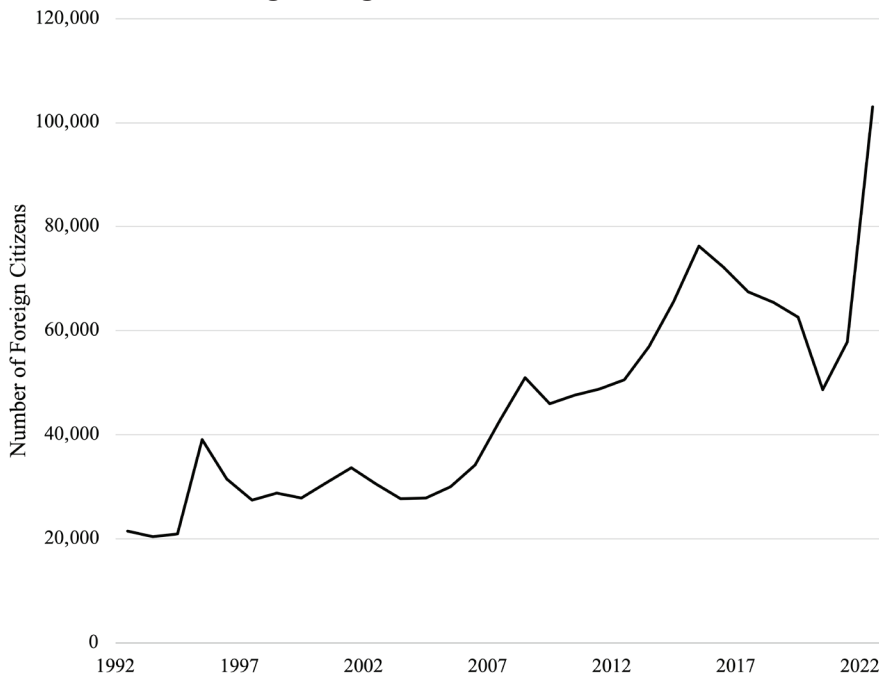
Background: immigrant statistics in Denmark

As can be seen in Figure 1, Denmark has seen a significant increase in immigration since around 1980. The population of native Danes has remained almost constant at 5 million since then, with the majority of the growth in total population to 5.9 million coming from immigration as of 2023 (Ministry for Economic Affairs..., 2018). In 1990, immigrants made up 4.58% of the total population, a percentage that has grown steadily since, reaching 15.4% in 2023 (Statistics Denmark, 2022).

Although religious demographic data are difficult to attain in Denmark, Islam is recorded as the second largest religion in Denmark, with Muslims making up approximately 4.4% (256,000) of the population as of 2020, contrasted with 0.6% (30,000) in 1980 (Jacobsen, 2018). In its 2010 *Report on International Religious Freedom*, the US Department of State attributes this growth to a significant number of Danish immigrants coming from countries with high Muslim populations, such as Turkey, Syria, and Iraq. Muslims, constituting approximately 40% of the total immigrants, are perceived to be incompatible with Danish democratic values, making them the target of negative public attitudes in Denmark and political immigration debates.

This incompatibility can be observed in the disparity between treatments of Syrian versus Ukrainian refugees. Although similar numbers of refugees have been recorded as coming from both Syria and Ukraine, it has been noted by news outlets and scholars and observed in general public discourse that the treatment of white European Ukrainian refugees, who have been offered residency permits, differs significantly from that of Muslim Syrian refugees, who were urged to leave Denmark while the Syrian civil war was ongoing. The head of Refugees Wel-

Figure 1
Foreign immigration to Denmark, 1992–2022



Source: Statistics Denmark, 2022.

come Denmark, Michala Clante Bendixen, attributed this disparity in treatment of Ukrainian and Syrian refugees to a higher value placed by the Danish government on white lives (John, 2022).

In general, more immigrants to Denmark are from non-Western (~58%) than Western (~42%) countries. Statistics Denmark defines non-Western as countries outside the EU except the USA, Canada, Andorra, Australia, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Monaco, New Zealand, Norway, San Marino, Switzerland, and Vatican City. This definition has been used in Danish policies to target and attack large groups of people who, save for their large non-white populations, bear few similarities to each other geographically and otherwise. Even the Ministry of the Interior and Housing maintains, “the distinction between Western and non-Western countries has nothing to do with a country’s political system, religion, economy, or culture” (Burnett, 2021).

The politics of immigration history

Immigration in Denmark did not become a central topic of political discussion until the 1980s. In 1983, the first Danish law regarding foreigners was passed with the intention of strengthening the legal position of refugees and immigrants. It was unanimously

adopted by all but one of the parties in Parliament (Green-Pedersen & Krogstrup, 2008). The lone outlier, the Progress Party, was established with, and has always taken, a hard stance against immigration. In fact, its 2010 political program expressly included ending immigration to Denmark as one of its goals. However, the Progress Party has not always been a popular party. Since the landslide election of 1973 when they won 28 (15.9%) of the 179 seats in Parliament,¹ the Progress Party has declined in popularity, winning zero seats in Parliament since 2001 (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2008). At first glance it may seem that the anti-immigration efforts of the Progress Party were inconsequential, but the ideas and policies that it represents have continued to have a footing in Danish politics. This is because in 1995, some members of the Progress Party broke away to establish a new party called the Danish People’s Party (DPP).

The DPP, which maintained popularity until the 2022 general elections, combined that popularity with the anti-immigration position of its predecessor, hence increasing the political relevance of immigration overall. From 2001 to 2022, the DPP was the third most represented party in government, holding about 13% of Danish Parliament seats. The party’s goals are based on anti-immigration attitudes and include policies that are even more intense and specific than those of its predecessor, the Progress Par-

¹They were second only to the Social Democrats, who won 25.6% of the seats.

ty. Whereas the Progress Party takes a clear stance against immigration alone, the DPP rejects both immigration and multiculturalism. The Party Program of the DPP as established in 2002 states, “Denmark is not an immigrant-country and never has been. Thus, we will not accept transformation to a multi-ethnic society. Denmark belongs to the Danes and its citizens must be able to live in a secure community founded on the rule of law, which develops along the lines of Danish culture” (*Principprogram*, 2002). Former party leader Pia Kjærsgaard went so far as to consider the idea of a multiethnic Denmark, “a public disaster” (Kjærsgaard, 1997). The DPP thereby established itself not only as a successor to the Progress Party but also as a full-blown metamorphosis of its anti-immigrant feeling.

Even more influential than the DPP is the Social Democratic Party, Denmark’s most represented party for most of the twentieth century. In 2019, party leader Mette Frederiksen was voted Prime Minister, and the party also won 25.9% of Parliament seats in that election and 27.5% in the following 2022 election. Denmark’s most popular party has retained its power for the duration of what has been a particularly turbulent period for migration and security globally.

Frederiksen, party leader since 2015, has been instrumental in promoting various anti-immigration policies and attitudes within the party and the Danish state. Under her leadership in 2016, the Social Democrats voted in favor of a law that allowed the confiscation of money, jewelry, and other valuable items from newly arriving refugees crossing the border. This law empowered the Danish police to strip search refugees and seize from their luggage any belongings worth over 10,000kr (\$1450). The law was not received well publicly and even garnered condemnation from the United Nations Human Rights Council as well as comparisons to the treatment of Jews in Nazi-occupied Europe (“Denmark Faces Backlash...,” 2016). The legislation came into effect in February 2016 and had been used 17 times by Danish police as of June 2022 (“Danish Police...,” 2022). The Danish Parliament decided that the law should not apply to Ukrainian refugees (“Denmark Plans...,” 2022).

In 2018, the Danish Parliament, of which the Social Democrats were the majority, passed a policy document, “One Denmark without Parallel So-

cieties: No Ghettos in 2030,” that aimed to eliminate “ghetto areas” by 2030 (Risager, 2022). “Ghetto” is defined in this document as a community meeting at least three of five criteria. One criterion was that “the share of immigrants and their descendants from non-Western countries is higher than 50%” (Nørgaard, 2018). The clear intent of this effort was to eradicate living spaces that overwhelmingly housed non-white people.

Most recently in 2021, Denmark was the first European country to declare Damascus and neighboring regions “safe to return to.” The result of this conclusion was the revoking of residency permits for refugees from Syria (*Denmark Declares Plans...*, 2021). Political agendas and associated messaging such as these, enacted by the Social Democrats, have influenced social attitudes toward immigrants, in turn affecting the ways they are treated in their day-to-day lives.

Social attitudes: “multiculturalism” and other dirty words

Although justifications are sometimes attempted for Denmark’s anti-immigration political action, certain other historical and societal contexts suggest that those policies emerge from prejudiced ideas about who black and brown immigrants are. These prejudices are frequently conveyed through the media and use of language and can be best understood with some revealing examples.

One well-known instance of the use of media and language to promote cultural bias is the Muhammad cartoon crisis of 2005. On September 30, 2005, the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* published cartoons depicting a principal figure of Islam, Muhammad, in several different situations. Under the headline, “Muhammeds ansigt,” which translates to “The Face of Muhammad,” are 12 representations of the Prophet Muhammad, including Muhammad with a lit bomb in his turban and the Islamic creed *shahadah*² written on the bomb as well as another representation of Muhammad on clouds as if in Heaven, greeting freshly arrived suicide bombers with text that translates to, “Stop, stop, we have run out of virgins!”³ (Henkel, 2010), clearly conveying a harmful and generalized representation of Muslims as suicide bombers and terrorists.

Owing to both the perceived offensive nature of the cartoons themselves and Islam’s tradition of aniconism, the cartoons ignited protests in Muslim communities around the world. These cartoons came at a time of heightened concerns about Islamic terrorism and radicalism post-9/11 and revealed the image of Muslims prevalent in the Danish zeitgeist

²An Islamic oath that reads, “I bear witness that there is no god but God, and I bear witness that Muhammad is the messenger of God.”

³In reference to the reward of 72 virgins (known as *Houris*) promised to Islamic martyrs (called *Shaheed* or *Shahid*). Original text reads: *Stop Stop vi er løbet tør for Jomfruer!*

at the time—one characterized by suicide bombers and terrorists. It is easy to understand how this perception of Muslims and brown immigrants would go on to inform Danish policies and attitudes for years after.

For example, a decade later in 2015, following an attack on a Danish synagogue, DPP founder Pia Kjærsgaard stated that Danish Muslims “[live] at a lower stage of civilization, with their own primitive and cruel customs” (“Denmark’s “Failed” Multiculturalism,” 2015). The next year, Martin Henriksen, also of the DPP, said in Parliament that “there is a direct correlation between refugees and terrorism” (from the Ritzau news agency, 2016, as cited in Bjerre et al., 2021). Similarly, an article published in 2019 (Hervik) includes an account of outrage in Denmark sparked by a story about women-only swimming classes in a Copenhagen suburb with a high number of immigrants. The original story was released in *Berlingske Tidende*, a national newspaper, with the headline, “New Danish girls take over the swimming pool—if it is emptied of boys,” and states that the aim of this program had been to encourage the participation of girls from ethnic minorities who tended to be absent from swim classes for religious reasons (Burhøi, 2017). Hervik (2019) surveys public reaction, including the following:

‘Are we living in Denmark or in an Islamic caliphate?’; ‘Segregated swimming is not Danish’; ‘Soon, pig breeding will be prohibited, since certain citizens with a specific religion cannot breathe the same air as pigs’; ‘Those who cannot behave according to Danish norms must be expelled’; and ‘Every time we give them an inch they will take a mile’. ‘This is not Denmark’; ‘This is not Saudi Arabia’ (pp. 538–539).

Collectively, these opinions, ranging from elected national officials to the general public, even if not universally held, reveal much about the Danish state of mind regarding immigrants (Lindhardt, 2022).

In response to the question “Is Denmark a multicultural country?” asked at a 2015 political debate, Helle Thorning-Schmidt from the Social Democratic Party said, “No, I don’t think so,” and her rival Lars Løkke Rasmussen from the liberal party Venstre replied, “No, but we are in danger of becoming one.” The use of the word “danger” exposes the fear that is often present in anti-immigration discourse in the nation—a fear not only of the Muslim but also of a hypothetical Danish society that differs from the existing idea of what Denmark is and should be. In this hypothetical society, the highly cohesive and demanding civic culture that most Danes consider a part of their identity, has fallen apart in correlation

with a transition to a more “multicultural” society. The headline “New Danish girls take over the swimming pool” takes fuel from the idea of the danger of a “new” type of Dane—one who will take over, replace, and erase what is considered real and true to Denmark (Sinclair, 2015).

The source of the issue: immigrants in the Danish welfare economy

The drain on the Danish welfare economy caused by immigrants, as well as their low labor market participation, is often cited by politicians and decision-makers as justification for the anti-immigration sentiment in Denmark. For instance, in 2021, Prime Minister Frederiksen enacted a plan that was criticized for being anti-immigration. The plan required that some migrants work 37 hours a week in order to receive the same welfare benefits offered freely to other legal residents of the country, regardless of employment status or economic position. Frederiksen is quoted as saying, “it is basically a problem when [Denmark has] such a strong economy, where the business community demands labor, that we then have a large group, primarily women with non-Western backgrounds, who are not part of the labor market” (BBC News, 2021). To Frederiksen, the low labor market participation of immigrants is the justification for the controversial plan to make migrants work for their own welfare benefits. The claim at the center is that despite the Danish economy’s high demand for labor, specific populations do not contribute to that labor. As a welfare economy, Denmark depends on the high taxes of its employed population to carry the burden of sponsoring social benefits for the rest of the country. That burden is made worse by trends in Denmark, such as increased life expectancy and earlier retirement. Immigration is sometimes assumed the remedy to that growing burden, especially because immigrants tend to be relatively young with higher fertility rates and economic utility. However, some studies suggest that this assumption is incorrect, therefore validating and fortifying the claims and concerns of Frederiksen and other Danish people who are against immigration.

Brandt and Svendsen (2019) conclude that in the presence of open borders, “welfare states in general will transform into low-welfare societies if incentives are not met by proper policies.” Similarly, Hansen et al. (2017) find that in Denmark, “immigrants from Western countries have a positive fiscal impact, while immigrants from non-Western countries have a large negative one.” They predict that non-Western residents will continue to make a net negative economic contribution by the year 2050, worsening the

economic challenges caused in part by Denmark's aging population.

This latter study explains that in order for immigration to be fiscally sustainable in Denmark, immigrants must be high-skilled and must satisfy the needs of the labor market. The study determines that this is not the case because of certain factors, such as weak economic incentives for immigrant labor market participation, barriers that prevent immigrants' entry into the labor market, and skills mismatch between many non-Western immigrants and Denmark's increasingly knowledge-based economy. The outcome of all this is a positing of non-Western immigrants as net beneficiaries rather than contributors to the welfare state, which causes a net drain of billions of euros annually. These results are summarized in a calculation by Hansen et al. (2017), based on projections made by the Danish Rational Economic Agents Model (2015) (Table 1).

As Table 1 shows, both native Danes and non-Western immigrants make net negative contributions to the Danish economy while Western immigrants make net positive contributions (second-generation Western and non-Western immigrants have lower net contributions due to their younger age and resulting limited tax payment contributions). Further, when taking into account the large difference in proportions of the population of native Danes and non-Western immigrants, the loss of €2.2B (€0.55B from the first generation and €1.7B from the second generation) caused by all non-Western immigrants, who only make up 7.2% of the population, is sig-

nificantly worse per person than the loss caused by all native Danes, who make up 89% of the population. In determining the causes for the net drain from non-Western immigrants, the analysis points to high effective minimum wages as one factor that makes it difficult for immigrants to find employment unless they are highly productive to begin with (Hansen et al., 2017).

Another relevant study, by Nannestad (2004), also arrives at the same conclusions and points to high minimum wage as a reason. Nannestad also argues that the social benefits that immigrants receive while unemployed weaken their incentive to participate in the labor force. Furthermore, in his discussion of barriers to the entry of immigrants to the labor market, he points to the high tax pressure that results from Denmark's welfare system, which may be unattractive to immigrants with a low market value. All these conclusions from 2004 continue to be echoed in more recent studies and debates.

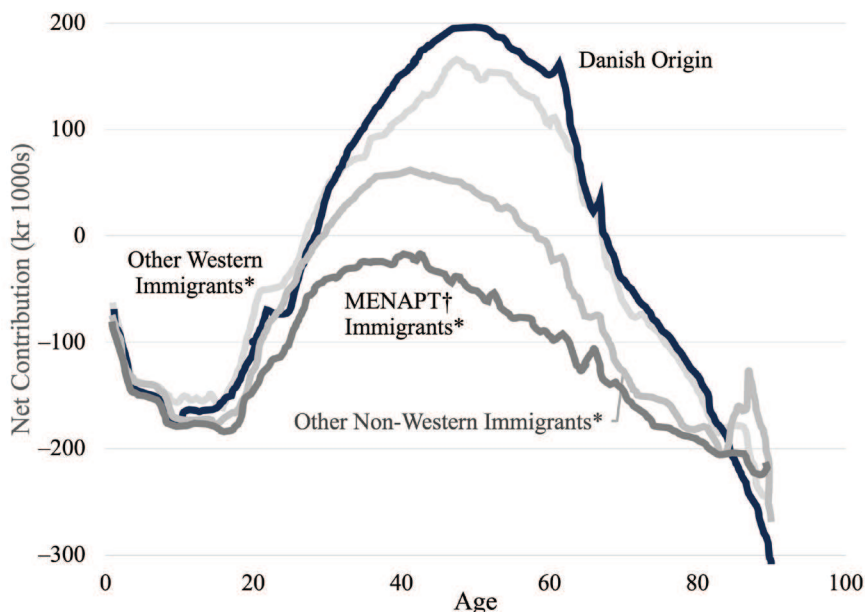
Such studies on the economic outcomes of immigration are particularly important because they inform the resulting policies and social interactions of immigrants in Denmark, especially with political debate over immigration continuing to intensify as the world undergoes global refugee crises. The Danish Finance Ministry examines the net contribution of immigrants to public finances; its results are shown in Figure 2. Torben Tranaes of the Danish Center for Social Science Research in 2018 references this study, stating that such data were what "changed the Social Democrats point of view," making them

Table 1
Predicted annual public revenue and expenditure, by origin, 2014

	Natives	Western immigrants	Western second-generation immigrants	Non-Western immigrants	Non-Western second-generation immigrants	Total (2013 € values)
	%	%	%	%	%	€ billion
Proportion of the population	89.0	3.5	0.4	4.9	2.3	
Income from taxes and VAT	90.9	3.7	0.2	4.5	0.8	121.7
Expenditure on						
Income replacement	90.2	2.6	0.2	5.6	1.1	-39.4
Public individual consumption	90.3	2.5	0.4	3.7	3.0	-47.8
Fixed public goods	88.8	3.6	0.4	4.9	2.3	-19.0
Other expenditures	88.7	4.0	0.3	5.5	1.4	-19.8
Total net contributions (€ billion)	-2.7	0.7	-0.2	-0.6	-1.7	-4.4

Source: Hansen et al., 2017.

Figure 2
Average net contribution to public finances, 2018 (kroner, thousands)



* And their descendants.

† Middle East, North Africa, Pakistan, and Turkey.

Source: “Why Have Danes Turned...”, 2021, based on data from the Danish Foreign Ministry.

more anti-immigration (“Why Have Danes Turned...”, 2021).

Other scholars and studies have taken varied approaches to understanding the effects of immigration on the welfare economy and arrive at different conclusions. Foged and Peri (2016) move beyond simply observing the net economic output of non-EU immigrants and refugees to focus on how their presence in the labor force interacts with the presence and output of native Danes. They conclude that an increase in refugees to Denmark led young Danish workers and those with limited experience toward more high-skilled and non-manual occupations, leading to positive or null effects on their employment and wages. For a country that depends so heavily on its labor force, particularly in high-skilled occupations, this is significant. Upward mobility of native Danes and higher wages due to immigration mean not only higher incomes for those native families but also the ability to contribute more to the welfare state. The specific net gains of this upward mobility and how they offset the overall net loss caused by immigrants remain fertile ground for future research to fully understand the interaction of immigrants with the Danish economy. However, Foged and Peri’s conclusion is that immigrants have a positive effect on the Danish labor market.

A 2023 article in *European Policy Analysis* on how immigration relates to social expenditures and

generosity of pension and unemployment benefits policy finds that “there is little support that migration has a burdening or undermining effect on the welfare state.” The reason this recent study reaches such a different conclusion is that rather than focusing on social expenditure as the indicator of welfare state strength, it addresses policy generosity more broadly, including areas such as unemployment protection and pensions. Although this report uses pooled data from 21 different OECD countries, including Denmark, further research into how these conclusions hold up specifically in the Danish state is needed to provide a different context to the discussion of immigrants’ position in the Danish welfare economy (Römer, 2023).

Racism, xenophobia, and fear

Alongside the economic arguments against immigration, there are other reasons for Denmark’s anti-immigration policies and attitudes that do not have economic justifications. When national-level politicians made comments regarding the segregated swimming outrage in 2019, their opposition was not because of any negative economic outcomes caused by immigrant women learning to swim. Moreover in 2016, when officials of the Danish city Randers approved a DPP proposal to require pork on the menu of all public institutions, it was not because the lack of pork in Muslim food led to their net negative economic

output. Rather, as one author writing in the *European Journal of Cultural Studies* puts it, “the rationale behind the proposal seemed to be that Danish culture was under attack and that the promotion of traditional dishes constituted a much-needed bulwark” (Lindhardt, 2022).

Although the potentially negative economic outcomes of non-Western immigrants are often used as the justification for anti-immigration policies, those economic positions can also be used as a shield for other racist and xenophobic ideas about who immigrants are and what their effect on Danish culture is. These ideas are often disguised in what is referred to as the “values debate.” One scholar explains the values debate as actually linking the non-integration of Muslims and immigrants to what many Danes perceive as differing and inferior, if not in some cases appalling, values. The author further maintains that this perception of a different system of values is almost exclusively linked to Islam and a fear that Islamic values, which are believed to lead to crime and war, will corrupt the peaceful and democratic Danish culture (Vejlby, 2011).

This line of reasoning relies partially on a presumption that rests on shaky ground, that is, a correlation between non-Western immigrants and crime and insecurity in Denmark. One 2020 meta-research article on criminology statistics highlights this inconclusive correlation between immigrants and crime. After reviewing previous research on the subject, the author asserts that slight changes in methods and control conditions lead to a striking variation in the results. He adds that taking these inconsistencies into account, a definitive answer to whether immigrant status increases the risk of criminal involvement cannot be made (Klement, 2020).

Additionally, the reasoning undergirding the view of non-Western immigrants’ ability and potential to corrupt Danish society is based on an imagination of the Danish identity, which is itself contradictory. Danes imagine their identity and culture as fixed and determinate yet vulnerable enough to be transformed completely by the existence of other fixed and determinate cultures. Clearly, there is a misalignment of views; the question remains as to how Danes might refocus the reality of immigrants in their midst.

Conclusions

Despite its reputation as a socially liberal and progressive society, Denmark still suffers from racist and xenophobic attitudes and policies that may not be initially evident based on its tolerant historical legacy. An economic argument is often made that non-Western immigrants make a net negative con-

tribution to the Danish welfare economy. Although narrowly true, further investigation shows that other factors, such as the positive effects of immigration on the upward mobility of young native Danes as well as the effects of immigration on pension generosity and unemployment benefits, should be considered in evaluating the fiscal effects of immigration. Regarding the economic stance against immigration, it is therefore important that work is done to lower the barriers to productive work for immigrants. Further research is also necessary to bridge the gap in knowledge in terms of the net difference between the positive economic outcomes discussed and the drain immigrants place on the economy. Additionally, as data have shown that immigration leads to upward mobility of young native Danes, the Danish government must work to advance training and retention of youth in those higher-paying jobs to reduce the competition in lower wage work from immigrants and improve the economic position of those immigrants as well as native Danes.

Denmark’s anti-immigration attitudes extend to its politics, and the Progress Party and the DPP are among the most overt in their anti-immigration attitudes. These are expressed through political programs that use explicit language to assert that it is against their mission for Denmark to be a multicultural society. The Social Democratic Party, Denmark’s most popular party, has also made significant efforts to suppress the immigrant population, including revoking residency permits for Syrian refugees as well as efforts to eliminate areas with high immigrant residency called ghettos. These policies and political actions go on to influence the social treatment of immigrants in Denmark, which ends up being pervaded with racism and xenophobia. The first step toward progress in this regard is for the Danish public to have more open and honest conversations about the explicit role that race and racism play in their society. Danes could include and improve diversity, equity, and inclusion topics in their academic curricula and educational training and could pay closer attention to specific terms, such as ghetto, and how their use in political discourse could be harmful to immigrants and non-Western people living in Denmark.

Beyond that, Denmark must take political action. It is important that the Danish government reevaluate and equalize policies applied to immigrants from Ukraine and Syria. It is also important that Danes continue to vote and actively advocate against politicians and parties that espouse blatantly racist and xenophobic programs and language and work to remove laws, such as those regarding pork, instead

creating laws that ensure and protect the rights of immigrants to maintain and honor their languages, cultures, and identities.

With the understanding that global migration, including migration to Denmark, shows no signs of slowing, the best and perhaps only way forward is to address the racism and xenophobia that are present in Denmark and to challenge current research, ideas, and laws that harm the ability to imagine and create safe societies for every person regardless of where they come from and what they look like. Danes should reevaluate their biases and demand more from their government, and from themselves, when it comes to the equal recognition and care that should be accorded to all human lives. Equality for all does not mean that everyone is forced to conform to one way of living; thus, it should be possible for the Danish equality ethos to move further, in a far more inclusive direction.

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