

Examining migration policies and racial discrimination in Denmark through the lens of social organizations and movements

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Examinando las políticas migratorias y la discriminación racial en Dinamarca desde la perspectiva de las organizaciones y los movimientos sociales

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Summary: Introduction. 1. Conceptual framework. 2. The political approach to immigration in Denmark. 3. Methods. 4. Perceptions on Danish immigration and integration policies. 5. Perceptions on the situation of racism in Denmark. Conclusions. References.

Abstract: Denmark has implemented multiple restrictive migration and integration policies, significantly limiting the arrival, settlement, and inclusion of migrants and refugees. Amid a broad political consensus supporting these measures, civil society organizations have been advocating for migrant rights, fostering cultural encounters, and promoting a more inclusive society. This qualitative study investigates the perspectives of 21 civil society representatives regarding migration and integration policies, as well as their views on racial and ethnic discrimination in Denmark. Our findings highlight these organizations' critical stance on migration policies and their role as agents of transformation who can counteract the assimilationist and exclusionary

rhetoric and practices that have become normalized in the country. While all interviewees express concerns about discrimination, some specifically perceive racism as a structural issue that is largely denied in Danish public and political discourse, arguing that it causes significant harm to both migrants and Danish society and requires urgent attention.

Key words: Migration policies, civil society, racism, discrimination, Denmark.

Resumen: Dinamarca ha implementado múltiples políticas restrictivas de migración e integración, limitando significativamente la llegada, el asentamiento y la inclusión de personas migrantes y refugiadas. En medio de un amplio consenso político que respalda estas medidas, las organizaciones de la sociedad civil han estado defendiendo los derechos de las personas migrantes, fomentando los encuentros culturales y promoviendo una sociedad más inclusiva. Este estudio cualitativo investiga las perspectivas de 21 representantes de la sociedad civil sobre las políticas de migración e integración, así como sus opiniones sobre la discriminación racial y étnica en Dinamarca. Nuestros hallazgos destacan la postura crítica de estas organizaciones frente a las políticas migratorias y su papel como agentes de transformación capaces de contrarrestar la retórica y las prácticas asimilacionistas y excluyentes que se han normalizado en el país. Si bien todas las personas entrevistadas expresan preocupación por la discriminación, algunas perciben el racismo como un problema estructural ampliamente negado en el discurso público y político danés, y sostienen que causa un daño significativo tanto a las personas migrantes como a la sociedad danesa, y que requiere una atención urgente.

Palabras clave: políticas migratorias, sociedad civil, racismo, discriminación, Dinamarca.

Introduction¹

The rejection of immigration is causing a particularly serious situation in terms of guaranteeing the rights of people with an immigrant background and the very foundations of democracy in Europe (de Lucas 2015). Across the globe, nationalist populism has spread, advocating, among other things, the need to protect states from the perceived threat that immigration poses to national identity and the well-being of natives. This narrative is based on the idea that those who have come from other countries enjoy some privileged conditions that come at the expense of the rights of an indigenous population that has been left behind (Eatwell and Goodwin 2018).

In the European Union, populist and radical political forces, mostly situated on the radical right political spectrum, have seen their influence grow in recent years and have not hesitated to systematically use hate speech to promote popular opposition to migrants and their descendants. Although these political forces vary significantly depending on the territory, they all share the rejection of immigration and the demonisation of immigrants as central to their political agenda (Alieti and Padovan 2020). Moreover, they have been identified as a serious threat to democratic guarantees, the recognition of cultural and religious pluralism and social cohesion (Mora 2023).

With 16.3% of its population composed of migrants and their descendants², Denmark has experienced a particularly pronounced rise in anti-immigration sentiment in recent years, which has been accompanied by the adoption of highly restrictive policies. Amid the growing problematization of migration and its protagonists, and in the face of the broad political consensus supporting the tightening of migration and integration policies in Denmark —largely backed even by the social democratic party— social organizations have been articulating various responses. These associations appear to play a relevant role in generating better conditions for the inclusion and guarantee of rights of people of immigrant origin residing in Denmark. However, the work of these organizations under such conditions has

¹ This work was carried out within the framework of the R&D project funded by the Ministry of Science and Innovation and ERDF funds: *Times and spaces of inclusive justice: Rights for a resilient society facing new challenges* (IN_JUSTICE, Ref. PID2021-126552OB-I00). The fieldwork was conducted during a research stay at the Centre for Advanced Migration Studies (AMIS), University of Copenhagen.

² The main countries of origin among immigrants and their descendants are Turkey (6.9%), Poland (5.8%), Ukraine (5.1%), Romania, and Syria (4.7%) (Statistics Denmark, 1 January 2025).

been scarcely studied. Notably, Back and Olsen (2020) conducted an in-depth analysis of the network of refugee assistance groups known as *Venligboerne* (friendly neighbours), a unique initiative that stands out for its widespread implementation in Denmark and its crucial role in fostering contact with refugees based on coexistence, solidarity, and recognition. Similarly, the association *Trampoline House*, which operated in refugee support, is highly regarded in the field and is considered one of the strongest expressions of resistance to the dominant white supremacist structures in Denmark (Suárez-Krabbe 2019).

In this article, drawing on 17 interviews with 21 informants, we analyze how civil society organizations in Denmark working on refugee and migrant inclusion, social cohesion, and anti-discrimination understand migration and integration policies, as well as the current state of racism, within a particularly hostile political context.

We study those organizations that can be considered part of the “good and civilized civil society” (Ruzza 2020), as they aim to improve society by promoting rights, human capacities, and meeting essential needs to foster human development. We begin with the premise that the perspectives of these organizations’ leaders play a central role in shaping their policy frameworks and guiding their strategies in this area. The analyses emerging from these actors are crucial for studying these realities, as they are organizations with direct and continuous contact with migrants and refugees, serving as spaces for reflection and collective action. As evidenced in our research, they also have a significant presence in society, which grants them social and political influence. Additionally, they offer valuable insights into the discriminatory attitudes faced by this population and the impact of policies on their daily lives and future prospects.

We focus on voluntary social organizations and social movements as potential vehicles of dissent, often made up of oppositional voices and manifestations of disagreement against the dominant order and with the capacity to make disagreement visible and manifest it in the public space (Back and García Agustín 2015, 14).

1. Conceptual framework

Although the next section will examine previous studies and specific literature on Denmark’s migration and integration policies in greater depth, this section presents general conceptual considerations

regarding racism, discrimination, national populism, and civil society organizations that provide a foundation for understanding the empirical context.

For the purposes of this study, we understand racism as “a system of domination and inferiorization of one group over another based on the racialization of differences, in which the interpersonal, institutional, and cultural dimensions are articulated” which is expressed “through a set of ideas, discourses, and practices of invisibilization, stigmatization, discrimination, exclusion, exploitation, aggression, and dispossession” (Aguilar and Buraschi 2016, 34). Therefore, we consider it as “a structural system of hierarchies of power and privilege and associated oppression” (Osanami and Suyemoto 2022, 2). Racism and discrimination cannot exist without racial formation and racialization, understood as the construction of racial groups in a given context, a frequently unrecognized process that leads to the creation of structures of power and privilege (Osanami 2022).

Discrimination, as defined by the United Nations Human Rights Committee³, is “any distinction, exclusion, restriction, or preference based on certain grounds, such as race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, economic position, birth, or any other social condition, which has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment, or exercise, on an equal footing, of human rights and fundamental freedoms of all persons”. Discrimination against migrants or racialized individuals can be based on one or more of these grounds, and when these grounds are race, color, descent, or national or ethnic origin, it is considered racial discrimination, as established by the 1965 Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination.

Racism and discrimination, and the subsequent exclusion of migrants and refugees, are both drivers of and consequences for the advance of populist movements and anti-immigration policies. As Illouz (2023) argues, fear of migrants can turn them into perceived enemies and thereby facilitate violations of their human rights. Alongside disgust —especially intensified in times of polarization— other emotions, such as resentment, linked to the perception among certain groups of losing power and privilege, and national pride, associated with the perceived need to protect the nation from a physical and cultural “invasion,” collectively fuel an anti-universalist backlash. This

³ See United Nations Human Rights Committee in its General Comment No. 18, of November 10, 1998: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/treaty-bodies/ccpr>

backlash, in turn, enables the adoption of increasingly restrictive policies regarding fundamental rights.

Norris and Inglehart (2019) identify three main factors underlying anti-immigration attitudes: *instrumental concerns*, related to competition over scarce resources and perceived threats to the population's material well-being; "cultural anxieties", associated with nativist views, resentment, racial prejudice, islamophobia, and xenophobia; and "fear of terrorism", which is linked to Islam. In their study of these issues, drawing on an extensive analysis of data from the European Social Survey, the authors conclude that, in Europe, fear of losing one's cultural identity is, overall, more strongly associated with support for authoritarianism than fears related to the impact of immigration on the labour market, wages, and social benefits.

Civil society, encompassing organizations and associations that exist outside the state and market and extending far beyond traditional non-governmental organizations (Carothers and Barndt 1999, 19-20), plays a key role in countering this politics of fear and has shown considerable potential in fostering social cohesion and intercultural dialogue (Ruzza 2021). In some contexts, these organizations have been proved to be potential vehicles of dissent, often made up of oppositional voices and manifestations of disagreement against the dominant order and with the capacity to make disagreement visible and manifest it in the public space (Back and García Agustín 2015, 14).

Civil society organizations have also been understood as part of "infrastructures of solidarity", which are particularly rooted in cities, as Salifu and Back (2025) argue in the case of Copenhagen. The authors link this form of solidarity to a politics of welcome aimed at precarious migrants and identify three components of these infrastructures that are clearly observable in the city: a discursive component, related to identifying frames that challenge exclusionary narratives and problematic representations of migrants while promoting alternative ways of interpreting the world; a legal component, concerning commitments to developing a politics of welcome; and a material component, based on the provision of public and institutional spaces for everyday encounters between refugees and people engaged in solidarity practices.

2. The political approach to immigration in Denmark

The tightening of immigration-related policies in Denmark can be traced back to around 2001 and has occurred alongside the growing

influence of anti-immigration parties, particularly the Danish People's Party (Mouritsen and Jensen 2014), which was a key supporter of national governments from 2001 to 2011 and again from 2015 to 2019. This party, whose political action has always been primarily centered on rejecting immigration —particularly from Muslim-majority countries— reached its peak electoral support in 2015, obtaining 21.1% of the vote and securing 37 seats (out of 179) in the Danish Parliament. However, it then began to decline, losing 21 of those seats in the 2019 elections and retaining only 5 in 2022.

The European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI), in its latest report on the country, has drawn attention to the political situation regarding hate speech, stating that “Muslims in Denmark, including guest workers and persons who have been granted asylum, are increasingly depicted, including by politicians of different political parties, as a threat to Danish values and culture” (ECRI 2022, 5). The Commission has recommended that Denmark develop a legal framework to cut off funding to racist organizations and political parties and dismantle them (ECRI 2022).

Among the most controversial measures taken in recent years in the country are the so-called “jewellery law”, which allows the confiscation of assets from asylum seekers who arrive in Denmark⁴; the plan to put an end to “parallel societies” (Danish Ministry of Economy and Interior 2018), which includes measures such as demolishing entire blocks of houses or the expulsion of families to avoid the concentration of people “of non-Western origin”⁵ and has had significant negative

⁴ The Aliens Act was amended in January 2016 to include the possibility of taking goods and cash from asylum seekers when they exceed the value of DKK 10,000 (about €1,345). Bill to amend the Immigration Law, Law 87, 26 January 2016 (Library of Congress 2016).

⁵ This is the term predominantly used in the country, even in public discourse. The official institution for statistical data collection, Statistics Denmark, classifies as non-Western all individuals from abroad of the European Union, the United Kingdom, Andorra, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Monaco, Norway, San Marino, Switzerland, Vatican State, Canada, USA, Australia, and New Zealand. A group of tenants from areas like Mjølnerparken (in Copenhagen) have challenged the legality of these measures against the so-called “ghettos”, arguing that they amount to discrimination on grounds of ethnic origin. Their case was referred by the national court (the Eastern High Court of Denmark — Østre Landsret) to the Court of Justice of the European Union under a preliminary ruling procedure (Case C-417/23, *Slagelse Almennyttige Boligselskab – Afdeling Schackenborgvænge*). In February 2025, Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) Advocate General Tamara Čápeta concluded that the Danish legislation constitutes direct discrimination on the grounds of ethnic origin within the meaning of Article 2(2)(a) of Council Directive 2000/43/EC of 29 June 2000 (the Race Equality Directive).

effects on the population in these areas (Söderberg 2024); or the existence of a network of deportation centres, where people whose asylum applications have been rejected and who do not comply with the order to leave the country —yet cannot be forcibly expelled— are confined indefinitely (sometimes for more than 10 years)⁶, causing what Suárez-Krabbe and Lindberg (2019) describe as a kind of apartheid. These centres have significant effects on the life projects and social and emotional well-being of the detainees (Clante 2021).

The foreign population is also the target of the government's controversial initiatives to combat begging and homelessness. Two of the measures introduced in this regard are the prohibition of living in street camps that "affect public order", subject to a fine, a ban on re-entering the city for up to two years and/or a prison sentence of up to 18 months for non-compliance⁷, and the establishment of prison sentences for begging on the street —14 days for the first offence, with increasing penalties for any subsequent ones⁸. These measures are primarily aimed at homeless foreigners (Danish Institute for Human Rights 2018, 9).

As part of the so-called "paradigm shift" in asylum policy in 2019, which aims to transform asylum into a mostly temporary status, Denmark became the first country to revoke the refugee status of individuals from certain areas of Syria deemed safe by the Danish authorities. This decision led to these individuals being interned in deportation centres or leaving for other countries, since most could not afford to return to Syria and there is no agreement with Syria that allows the Danish state to forcibly repatriate them. Since 2019 and until 2023, according to data from the Danish Immigration Service referred to by Reuters (Birkebaek and Skydsgaard 2023), 150 Syrian nationals have had their residence permits revoked. This new focus on repatriation, deportation and externalization contributes to cast refugees and immigrants as exogenous "others" "who disrupt the image of national harmony and the vision of the ordered welfare society" (Rytter 2023, 15).

Denmark's anti-immigration policy has been associated with the emergence of a neo-racism based primarily on the identification of

⁶ In 2024, 493 people were living in a deportation centre (The Danish Immigration Service 2025, 18).

⁷ Public Order Regulation (Bekendtgørelse om offentlige forsamlings- og ordensforhold), § 3(4) (as amended by Bekendtgørelse nr. 305 of 31 March 2017).

⁸ Danish Criminal Code (Straffeloven), Ch. 22, § 197 (as amended by Lov nr. 753 of 19 June 2017).

Muslims of immigrant origin as incompatible with the Danish population and supported by a populist, nationalist and anti-immigration political agenda that has been led by far-right populism and taken up by other political actors (Hervik 2012). Thus, migrants and refugees have often been portrayed in public debate as an "economic burden" and as culturally incompatible with Danish identity, and have been regarded as outsiders, people who cannot be considered truly Danish because they cannot assimilate properly to that Danish-Western culture that, to some extent, considers itself "superior to the rest" (Jensen et al. 2017). Integration policies in the country refer to a conception of society "as if it were a bowl of soup, in which migrants are expected to mix and dilute as quickly as possible", eliminating all vestiges of their own cultural idiosyncrasies (Rytter 2018, 4). Overall, an exclusionary form of assimilation has become dominant (Kymlicka 2012; Meer et al. 2015) seeking to enforce integration by limiting individual choice to maintain the country as a supposedly monocultural society (Fernández 2022). Interculturalism, by contrast, has never been part of the national political agenda, as it is perceived as a barrier to the country's enforced assimilationist policies (Mora 2022).

Racism, on the other hand, is portrayed as something that occurs sporadically and in isolation, but not as a structural reality in the country (Hansen and Suárez-Krabbe 2018; Jensen et al. 2017). It is seen as a phenomenon rooted in a biological ideology of racial differentiation, which has facilitated the creation of a narrative that frames racism as something that exists only "far away", "in the past", or "within the extreme right" (Danbolt and Myong 2019). The assumed non-existence of racism can lead to the marginalisation of anti-racism in immigration and integration policies and the ignoring of new, more subtle forms of racism (Jensen et al. 2017). This reality is linked to the stigmatization process surrounding research on immigration-related issues in the country, which has caused some researchers in the field to shy away from engaging in the public debate on these topics (Schmidt 2021). The portrayal of anti-racist research as a form of harassment against Danes, a narrative propagated by authors such as Bech and Necef (2013), disconnects the discussion of racism from an analysis of power structures, institutions, and history, instead framing racism as a divisive concept used to attack the majority of the Danish population (Danbolt and Myong 2019).

The exclusionary policies implemented in the country have been linked to the emergence of diverse social movements that seek to counteract them by developing various forms of acts of citizenship and

civic solidarity aimed at raising awareness, shaping public opinion, influencing policy, and promoting the inclusion of migrants and refugees (Bernhardt et al. 2025).

Analyzing the Danish government's campaign against asylum seekers during the so-called "refugee crisis", Wall (2023) shows how Danish citizens and grassroots civil society organizations have made an impact by challenging the border regime, making refugees visible, producing alternative forms of knowledge in opposition to official discourse, and defending liberal values and human rights in the country.

3. Methods

The approach to the object of study is conducted through a qualitative methodology based on interviews that allow for an in-depth investigation of the experiences and universes of meaning that a selection of actors express when they analyse the role of the social organizations and movements in which they actively participate.

To establish the sample of organizations, a strategic case- selection process was followed, based on prior exploratory work and guided by the advice of experts in migration studies in the country, as well as recommendations from interviewees, who suggested additional organizations to consider. The selection aimed to include the main relevant groups working in immigration, refuge, and inclusion —both those collaborating closely with authorities and those employing confrontation strategies. In total, 16 organizations were included in the sample, along with the testimony of an individual who has historically been involved in several associations and informal groups and has participated in the research as an activist with no specific affiliation. The sample primarily consists of formal associations and NGOs (13 of them) and also includes three groups identified as non-institutionalised grassroots social movements. Among the organizations studied, three are led by individuals of foreign origin. Their main areas of work have been classified as: promoting dialogue, supporting refugees, advocating for rights, anti-racist action, fostering inclusion, and cultural promotion.

There is a substantial difference among the various organizations studied regarding the funding that sustains their activities. Large entities such as the Danish Refugee Council, for example, are characterized by having a high number of institutional and private donors and managing substantial funds. On the other hand,

organizations like Venligboerne, Black Lives Matter, or Racismefri receive no public financial support and are entirely self-funded through their own work.

The issue of funding is one of the most divisive topics among these organizations. Some are particularly critical of the fact that funding often limits their freedom to decide what actions to take and how to carry them out, as well as their ability to publicly denounce injustices.

Several interviewees openly state that, even if they wished to engage in more political work, they must remain neutral to avoid losing donor support. Others, however, refuse to receive government funding in order to maintain their independence and freely raise their voices whenever they see fit—or because they directly accuse the authorities of working against the very principles their organizations defend.

In the particular case of Action Aid, the fact that it is a large international organization that does not rely on Danish government funds for its survival provides it with a degree of operational freedom that other entities cannot afford. In contrast, other associations, such as Kompasset, report that organizations working with homeless foreigners have been warned that public funding will be withdrawn if they provide assistance to people with irregular administrative status.

The primary method of data collection was the semi-structured interview, guided by a script of key topics presented in a general format but adapted to the specific characteristics of each organization analyzed. Three main themes were explored: 1) the organization's work and its perceived impact on guaranteeing rights, promoting inclusion, and fostering coexistence; 2) perceptions of Denmark's migration and integration policies; and 3) the reality of racism and discrimination in the country, along with the main related challenges. Interviews were conducted between September 2021 and January 2022.

To determine the appropriate interviewee within each organization or group, the general guideline was to select the formal leader. In the case of larger organizations or those with multiple areas of work, the person responsible for activities most relevant to this study was chosen. A total of 17 interviews were conducted, all but two in person, taking place in Copenhagen (15), Aarhus (1), and Odense (1), with efforts made to hold them at the organizations' headquarters whenever possible. The high concentration of interviews in Copenhagen reflects the fact that the country's most established and well-known organizations—those with the longest track records—are based in the capital, as identified by the experts consulted.

All interviews were conducted individually, except for those at the Centre for Muslim Rights (2 interviewees), Kompasset (2 interviewees), and Racismefri Odense (3 interviewees). Twelve out of the twenty-one interviewees were women. The interviews, conducted in English, lasted approximately one hour on average. Despite English not being the first language of either the interviewer or the interviewees, no significant communication issues arose. The interviewees were initially informed of the purpose of the research, and their oral consent was obtained for recording and for the use of their words in further analysis and publications related to the study. All of them agreed that their roles in the associations and groups to which they belonged could be identified. Therefore, it was decided to include these roles and associations in the text, allowing the discourses to be linked to the profiles and the specific work carried out by each organization. This is considered particularly relevant in the context of this research.

Table 1.
Interviews conducted⁹

Organization	Interviewee profile	City	Typology	Main function
Trampoline House	Programme Coordinator	Copenhagen	Association	Supporting refugees
The Human Library	Founder	Copenhagen	Association	Promoting dialogue
Finjan	Founder	Copenhagen	Association	Cultural promotion
Hackyourfuture	Project Manager	Copenhagen	Association	Working for Inclusion
Creative Minds	Member of the Board of Directors	Copenhagen	Association	Cultural promotion
Centre for Muslim Rights	(1) Chairperson (2) Member of the Board of Directors	Copenhagen	Association	Anti-racist action
SOS Racism	Director	Copenhagen	Association	Anti-racist action

⁹ Four other organizations were selected but, for various reasons beyond the researcher’s control, could not be included in the fieldwork: Refugees Welcome Denmark, Almen Modstand, AarhuSomali and Amnesty International.

Organization	Interviewee profile	City	Typology	Main function
Action Aid	Head of anti-discrimination campaigns	Copenhagen	Association	Promoting rights
Kompasset	(1) Social leader (2) Rights Area Manager	Copenhagen	Association	Working for Inclusion
Diversity Works	Network leader	Copenhagen	Association	Working for Inclusion
Racismefri-Odense	Activists (3)	Odense	Grassroots movement	Anti-racist action
Danish Refugee Council	Coordinator of the Integration Department	Copenhagen	Association	Supporting refugees
Venligboerne	Activist	Copenhagen	Grassroots movement	Supporting refugees
Dialogue Across	Founder and Coordinator	Aarhus	Association	Promoting dialogue
Black Lives Matter	Founder and spokesperson	Copenhagen	Grassroots movement	Anti-racist action
Bridge Builders - Centre for Dialogue Coffee	Secretary General	Copenhagen	Association	Promoting dialogue
Independent activist		Copenhagen	Social activist of foreign origin	

All interviews have been fully transcribed, except for one, where the interviewees requested not to be recorded. The information was analyzed using thematic categories based on the interview script and additional aspects that emerged from the participants' narratives. A descriptive analysis was conducted, along with an interpretative analysis that situates each discourse in relation to the others, the precepts of baseline theory, and the author's acquired knowledge of the study's subject.

Regarding the researcher's positionality, it is important to reflect on the potential effects of being a white male scholar from another

European country, engaged in voluntary and activist work within an intercultural and anti-racist civil society organization in his country of residence. The vast majority of interviewees were of Danish origin, with only a few born in a foreign country, some of whom were Black. It is highly likely that the researcher's national origin and physical appearance led to certain connotations that influenced the way he acted and how some actors perceived him. However, being aware of that has allowed the researcher to reflect on his potential biases and keep in mind the need to be especially respectful and grateful toward the participants.

All interviewees held relatively powerful positions, as they were presidents, directors, or representatives of the various participating organizations. The relationship between the interviewer and interviewees did not appear to be asymmetrical in any case.

Additionally, as someone socialized as a white man in a former colonizing European country, the researcher acknowledges the privileges that this background entails. These factors were carefully considered to ensure sensitivity in addressing certain topics and to express clear respect, recognition, and gratitude toward all study participants.

Although the researcher's primary role was academic, years of experience as an activist in various social movements facilitated a stronger connection with interviewees, fostering empathy while also striving to avoid bias stemming from personal experience, particularly in the interpretation of collected narratives.

4. Perceptions on Danish immigration and integration policies

All the organizations and movements covered in this study express a critical attitude towards political action in this field in recent years. While some do so in a more subtle and general manner, others present their arguments with greater forcefulness, referencing specific policy measures and actions. The criticisms are strong and wide-ranging, generally targeting the overall conception of migration and integration policies in the country. Several of them highlight that these policies are designed to discourage migrants from traveling to Denmark or remaining there once they have arrived:

There is a policy in place to make it as horrible as possible for especially refugees, but also for people who come here from third world countries, not EU residents as such, and other Western world

countries, but for anybody that's dark skinned or very different culture, or Arabic Muslim background, stuff like this, they put legal measures into place which are institutionalised discrimination. It's what we have here. We have a differentiation based on the law, but really, it's discrimination based on what social group in the society, what religious ethnic group we belong to. So there are special rules in place to make sure that people like you will have a difficult time here, that you'll be motivated to leave (Member of The Human Library).

The specific policies most frequently cited as examples of institutional discrimination by several entities include actions aimed at ending 'parallel societies', the policy of deportation and confinement in camps, and the revocation of refugee status for people from Syria as a consequence of the widely criticized 'paradigm shift' in asylum policy. Additionally, there is frequent mention of the spread of a negative, stigmatizing political discourse that, at times, directly promotes hatred and significantly hinders social integration processes —particularly targeting populations identified as Muslim.

Several of the organizations believe that immigration and inclusion policies should be labeled as racist. Others argue that while some racist practices and discourse can be found in Danish policy, the policies are more discriminatory than explicitly racist, as they exclude or disadvantage certain groups, though not necessarily for reasons primarily linked to racial or ethnic affiliation. This highlights how the understanding of racial discrimination differs from one organization to another and also reveals how some of these entities seem to avoid addressing race as a means of discrimination.

Rather than emphasizing a public commitment to integration, most entities believe that this objective has disappeared from the public agenda, which has shifted from a focus on integration to one on expulsion.

This condition of temporariness creates contradictions in the messages directed at migrants, who, on the one hand, are strongly urged to 'integrate' while, on the other, are encouraged —or even forced— to leave:

At the Job Centre... is it mandatory for the government to ask this question 'when do you go home?' and explain how many good things would happen if they go home. 'You can get money, we'll give you 200,000 (Danish kroner) the first two years or whatever, to go back to Syria'. So, there's no question that these policies, they make people feel unwelcomed. So, they are completely working

deliberately to make people feel unwelcomed because they don't want them to stay and, at the same time, they have this 'you have to work!', 'if you don't comply you won't get the benefits', and that takes away people's dignity (Member of Trampoline House).

With regard to perspectives on integration, most interviewees emphasize that it is politically framed from an assimilationist standpoint. Some link this to the sense of lack of recognition experienced by the migrants and refugees they work with, who are not accepted as they are and must constantly prove their adaptation—efforts that are never deemed sufficient because, ultimately, they are always perceived as 'non-Danish':

In the first ten years of Trampoline House existence the government was debating whether they should integrate or assimilate, and most of the times they used the word integration, but they meant assimilation. And that in itself is a problem in terms of getting people on the same side, letting people feel that they are accepted and they can contribute from their point of view, from where they are, as who they are, and instead, people get scared, tried to fit in and it's never enough, because every year there's a new tightening of the rules, so people get the feeling that it would never be enough, they will never be able to become Danish (Member of Trampoline House).

In several of the speeches collected, it is noted that restrictions on migration have become normalized in the country and are widely accepted by most political and social actors. Attempts to explore interpretations of the underlying causes of this situation have elicited diverse responses. Some, like the perspective illustrated in the following statement from the Venligboerne movement, clearly reflect the bewilderment these policies have generated within civil society, sparking an internal debate on how to interpret and counteract these discriminatory and stigmatizing measures:

Actually, I have spent a lot of time thinking about that because I find it very hard to explain it, I mean, I try to understand it, but I really can't... In the beginning I think that we thought that if we could only talk to people's feelings, if they could only understand that this guy is just like your brother, and this guy could be your son, and she could be your mother (...) it would change something. But things only became worse and worse and worse... I think I can describe it where it is a kind of nationalism, covered up as being... It's just horrible. (Member of Venligboerne in Copenhagen).

One thing on which all the considered actors agree is the fact that these are not policies designed to create solutions to real problems because, at times, the problems do not exist as such, or the solutions proposed are implausible or impossible to implement, or they are creating exactly the opposite of what they are supposed to achieve. There is also discussion about how a country that is among the most economically advanced in the world is being portrayed as if it were on the verge of collapse —an image that does not reflect reality and is built on what one key independent activist described as a ‘fictitious and truly toxic narrative’. Similarly, from Trampoline House these policies are considered ‘schizophrenic’, as they encourage migrants to work and integrate while simultaneously enforcing an integration policy that undermines their potential.

Migration, asylum, and integration policies serve only a symbolic purpose, creating a hostile environment for migrants that discourages them from wanting to travel to or stay in the country. This results in significant costs for the Danish government, such as maintaining deportation centres, which do not lead to any improvement in the country. On the contrary, they create a breeding ground that makes any social cohesion project in this diverse society particularly difficult, as clearly stated by the representative of Action Aid:

It's simple policy that has no real effect on the problem they are addressing but it has a real effect on the people that it's trying to talk to, making them feel not welcome and it's clear when I talk to our young people that they don't feel welcome, they really don't. They don't feel welcome, there is like a bad circle for Denmark that if you talk a lot about young people not being able to integrate in the society then they will not integrate and they will live up to what is said about them (Member of Action Aid).

In the opinion of several of the interviewed individuals, these policies are being accepted and, in some cases, supported and demanded by the population due to the fear that has been instilled regarding the inconveniences and dangers that immigration poses to the country, fundamentally in terms of maintaining national identity and the Welfare State. “They need to make problems to find the monster to free people of, so that's what they are doing here,” claims the representative of the cultural association FINJAN. And Creative Minds explains this very clearly, echoing what, in other words, has also been expressed by several of the interviewees:

They're... in general, playing on people's fear, what they don't know. A lot of people are scared of the asylum centres or the deportation centres and a lot of people are scared when they're watching in the news that refugees are crossing the borders or that this and this amount of people are being stuck here and they want to come to Denmark and there's definitely a lot of fear about that and the idea that we can't help everyone. Strangers, like refugees, coming to take resources we don't have a lot of; it's the fear that a lot of them are Muslims, they will not, like, be able to work in our society and people will not be able to integrate into our society and... so that fear is definitely there, which is also why it doesn't matter if you are voting left or right in that regard, it's the same, because that's really what they are gathering votes on (Member of Creative Minds).

Electoral calculation is, indeed, one of the most frequently cited reasons for explaining the hardening of immigration policies and their acceptance by a significant portion of the parliamentary spectrum. Those who address this issue in their speeches accuse the Social Democratic Party of having aligned with the anti-immigration strategy to the point of becoming, in this case, a virtual copy of the Danish People's Party, albeit with a friendlier face. While some interviewees attribute much of the growth in opposition to immigration and refugee issues to this latter party, most emphasize that it is the Social Democrats—who might have been expected to pursue less aggressive, more humane policies in line with guaranteeing refugee rights—that have chosen to enter the race to see who can appear tougher on immigration, aiming to gain more electoral support.

Some participants refer to a spiral that has been set in motion, one that is difficult to break, as it now seems impossible to win an election in the country without having a clearly hostile policy towards immigration. This, even if it means denying the human rights of people from other cultural or national origins or obstructing their chances of real integration in the country.

According to several interviewees, the effects of this hardline stance in migration policies manifest in the frustration felt by people of migrant origin who, despite being born in Denmark or having lived there for a long time, continue to permanently bear the stigma associated with immigration:

I think they're very too harsh. I think it's really rough. We don't welcome people at all. It's so hard to obtain citizenship (...). They constantly have to step up and explain themselves, so "I'm here, I'm

a benefit to society, I pay taxes, I'm a good citizen", and it's just not fair. And the ethnic Danes as myself, we're just here and there are no questions asked towards us. So yes, the inequality is upsetting and disturbing, and it's hard to support and most people just give up. The people have been here many years, they have a hard time living in this society (Member of Diversity Works).

Integration, which involves identification with society and a sense of belonging, is very difficult, if not impossible, in the current political context, according to all those interviewed who are familiar with the reality of migrants and refugees through their work or activism. They all agree that the message these individuals receive in the country is that they are not welcome, which is especially concerning when it comes to the young population:

It creates a lot of fear and anxiety among refugees. It creates a lot of anxiety and a lot of anger, and anger also among the young people, who say if we are doing everything that you asked us to do, why can I never be welcome here? (Member of Venligboerne).

The society doesn't want you, that's an idea that is created in the young people's minds because, of course, you're trying your best, you're trying to achieve a position in society, you're trying to achieve some kind of an ideal of integration but you're never able to reach it, because of your colour, because of your background, because of your parents' background, because of your religion maybe, or the religion that you are associated to be part of. There's no goal, there's no limit to what you have to do, so at the end of the day you are alienated because of your appearance also, so it's not about your abilities and what you can contribute with, it's all about that, so that leads a lot of people in despair (Independent Activist).

Some policies, such as those related to the temporary nature of residence permits for asylum reasons, are considered to be causing particular anxiety among the population and, fundamentally, among groups such as Syrians who have been unable to renew their permits and, after several years of settlement in the country, have been forced to leave or remain interned in deportation centres where they lose their freedom and face significant impacts on their psychosocial health:

Denmark is also the only country trying to make people travel back to Syria, and even if they haven't really managed to send a lot of people back, it has stressed so many people, like, people who are in HYF (*Hack Your Future*), they were doing really well and then they get this letter and they're called to talk to the police, and the police

are kind of threaten them to take away their residence permit, and they do like this and it suddenly just crashes, because there's so much insecurity (...) and it destroys like, complete families, right? Because of course even if you are not sent back but if your sisters are going to be sent back, how can you focus on going to work? And there are so many things in the law that just destroy, even, like... good integration processes or people that have really been on the good path, so there's no logic to the laws (Member of HackYourFuture).

According to most organizations, these policies seriously affect the integration prospects of people of foreign origin, jeopardising their future and that of the country as a whole. They especially threaten the health of individuals confined to deportation centres, who are left without prospects and unable to decide how they wish to live their lives:

And if you look more on the asylum side it's just like mentally really challenging for people and it's, like... people go underground and Denmark has been a deportation camp. They just keep them there, and they can't send people back to Iran, for example, so there's a lot of people from Iran, and they keep them there until they give up and go underground, or try to go to Germany, or UK, or somewhere else..., you just keep people there and spend a lot of money on keeping them there but really make them... mentally sick until they leave. And I think it's crazy that we actually keep doing that and keep accepting that and we just almost pretend that it's not a problem (HackYourFuture Member).

To counteract this, it is critical for most organizations to promote an environment where migrants and refugees feel welcome and recognized. These organizations often emphasize the importance of enabling them to participate fully and equally, so they can become part of the society and have an influence within it, including within Danish social organizations. This approach has been a core element of the Trampoline House's actions, as its leader explains. We also observed this firsthand during participant observations we conducted in a previous study in 2017, specifically in some of its "house meetings":

We learned that people, actually, they grow healthier... democracy makes people sane and I think that's an amazing revelation, it shouldn't be a big revelation but it is... there's so much you can achieve by just changing the culture. In a way it was our theory from the beginning because we saw how sick people were in

the camps and then we saw how much drugs they were administrated by the Red Cross medical system. And we started thinking, yes, they are really sick but maybe... I mean, if you listen to our experts then they say "yes, but these people are not sick when they arrive, it's after half a year that they start using the drugs". So the problem is not people, but the system, and then let's change the system instead of... drugging people (Member of Trampoline House).

In sum, after engaging with the main organizations working in the migration and refugee sector in Denmark, we have identified a clear consensus regarding the futility of these restrictive migration measures and the negative consequences they are causing. Political struggles and interests have prevailed, damaging coexistence and making it extremely difficult to foster social cohesion, as the authorities continue to promote confrontation and a lack of recognition for migrants and refugees living in the country.

5. Perceptions on the situation of racism in Denmark

There's lots of racism (...). Anyone with a foreign name in Denmark is very quickly just kicked out. So if your name is Anna Jensen, you're all good. But with these very complicated, beautiful names that we meet here, it's just really hard and we know... it's a given fact, anyone knows that they're just not, we won't hire. We prefer an ethnic Dane, which is horrible (...). But yes, racism is very big. Unfortunately, still, Denmark is not a very multiethnic country. We're not used, still not used to foreigners (Member of Diversity Works).

According to the organizations studied, racism and discrimination are undeniably present in the country. Although some of the people interviewed consider that the existence of discrimination is clearer than that of racism, the majority agree in qualifying racism as structural or institutional, as it is seen as deeply embedded in society, in its laws, and the ways power, resources, and recognition are distributed. The existence of a daily, often subtle racism is reported, which has a strong influence on the life chances and integration paths of people of migrant origin, most of whom are forced into precarious jobs, and whose membership of Danish society is questioned, even though they may have been born in Denmark.

The *Kompasset* association, which has special contact with foreign homeless people from Eastern Europe and Roma, emphasises the

institutional racism that specifically targets this population. They highlight how legislation has been enacted with the sole aim of persecuting them, such as the laws criminalizing begging or camping on Danish streets. These laws were publicly justified as being directed at this population, although this reference was later omitted in the official documents for the sake of political and legal correctness.

The organizations express significant concern about the rise in racism, which has been exacerbated by tougher migration policies. This rejection of individuals of migrant origin —particularly those identified as 'non-Western', Muslim, Roma, and/or black— has become a central issue in capitalizing on voter support. Adding to this concern is the perception among interviewees that Danish society operates under the assumption that racism does not exist, thereby discouraging any attempts to analyze or confront the phenomenon. The absence of comprehensive studies and the lack of data collection on this issue make it impossible to assess its true magnitude and scope, and contribute to the failure to classify clear instances of racism, including racially motivated crimes, as such.

It seems that there is a deliberate strategy that, by denying the existence of racism, allows it to persist without publicly tarnishing the country's reputation as an advanced and civilized nation that treats people of migrant origin with humanity. However, according to some of the interviewees, there is a clear contradiction in Denmark: a society that perceives itself as more advanced than others, yet simultaneously fosters extremely xenophobic and discriminatory attitudes, which are, in turn, rooted in this ethnocentric and supremacist view:

I think the worst part of what's happening here is really that the public wants this. A large group of these white well-off people in Denmark actually want the dark people suppressed. They want them out of here. They want them to leave (...). It's my impression that in these Nordic countries we have a self-perception of being superior in intelligence, in organisational degree, in civilisation level, in financial status, etc. We're rich countries, we have the welfare system, we take care of our weak, our streets are paved and there's lights at night and then someone sweeps the streets and... But it doesn't hide the fact that we think we're, in this way because of that, better than the others, better than the ones from countries that are lesser developed. I think what's deep inside most people here is a perception that potentially we're just a little bit more civilized, we're a little bit more developed, they're a little bit uncivilized, behind modern times (Member of The Human Library).

As part of this strategy of denial of racism in a highly developed country like Denmark, some highlight the criminalisation of movements that challenge it, with particular emphasis on Black Lives Matter. This movement has faced intense criticism from politicians, citizens, and the media, who accuse the organization of basing its struggle on a fallacy that unjustly tarnishes the reputation of Danish society. "I'm the enemy of the state, the most evil, horrible, hateful woman in the history of Denmark", explains the leader of the movement, "they have really portrayed me as that just because I question." The "wilful ignorance of racism", as Molla (2024) has called it, provokes not only the failure to notice the problem but also the active disregard for it and the stigmatization of those who are fighting against it.

In this line of reasoning, another activist, of Pakistani origin, points out how becoming visible in this field can entail significant costs in terms of social recognition and professional advancement, warning of a situation that does not seem anecdotal in the country and which, in her opinion, particularly affects people belonging to ethnic minorities:

When it comes to getting employment it's hard, because being outspoken... I haven't changed, I'm talking about the same issues (...) but still it puts me in a situation where it is also harmful to my possibilities of getting a job, so that's also why people are silenced, and people that are talking about these issues, either they have an organization or either they are, I would say, less vulnerable if they don't have a minority background. Because I'm seen as untamed and as wild (Independent activist).

This contempt for the anti-racist struggle is part of the broader strategy to discredit migration studies that was mentioned at the beginning of the text, and which is graphically pointed out by one of the interviewees:

It's also towards people working in that sector; so, the migration area, and other areas of research, is also under exploration from the government, which is also very shocking as a Danish person to experience. In other countries you've heard about it, but in Denmark... I am, as a migration researcher, quite shocked that I really have to consider how I position myself, how I'm writing the stuff that I'm writing, what can I say, what can I do (Member of Creative Minds).

From the perspective of social organizations in Denmark, portraying migrants and refugees as a threat fosters various feelings of rejection

toward this population, associating its members with something intrinsically dangerous. This, in turn, encourages ethnocentric attitudes and creates space for the expansion of racial and ethnic discrimination.

Conclusions

For many of the major Danish social organizations working in the field of immigration and inclusion, Denmark's policy of rejecting immigration is a clear expression of contempt and/or disregard for people of 'non-Western' origin who are in the country and are suspected of not wanting to 'integrate' because they do not wish to adopt the values and ways of life that characterize Danish society, particularly when it comes to Muslims. This aligns with the literature that identifies Denmark as an assimilationist and exclusionary country (Kymlicka 2012; Meer et al. 2015; Jensen et al. 2017, Rytter 2018; Fernández 2022).

From the perspective of the organizations studied, fear appears to be the most significant driver of support for restrictive anti-immigration policies in the country. This fear is based on the perceived threat of the destruction or contamination of Danish culture and national identity, reaffirming the importance of emotions that have been identified as crucial to the triumph of national-populist political forces (Eatwell and Goodwin 2018; Norris and Inglehart 2019; Illouz 2023).

The various restrictive measures approved in recent years, along with the rhetoric that has accompanied them, seem to have contributed to the emergence and consolidation of a climate of tension, posing a substantial obstacle to social and collective cohesion and well-being. Often, these policies have been more symbolic than effective, focusing not on actual problem-solving but rather on winning electoral support in a competition among parties to demonstrate who can provide greater protection from the perceived immigration threat—a contest in which the Social Democratic Party has actively and openly participated.

The issues surrounding diversity, and the lack of policies specifically designed to encourage intercultural coexistence, combined with increasingly restrictive measures that complicate the lives of migrants and refugees, have had significant impacts on these individuals, increasing their vulnerability and exposure to discrimination, especially for those identified as 'non-Western'. This situation is causing particular unease among people of migrant descent, as highlighted by several participants in this study. This perception aligns with

Simonsen's (2017) conclusion that the feeling of being negatively 'othered' and not recognised as Danish leads to a strong lack of identification and even a clear disidentification with the Danish community among some young descendants of Middle Eastern immigrants.

The hardening of immigration and integration management policies has reached a level of progressive normalisation that concerns many of the representatives of the organizations studied, and which represents a major obstacle to the achievement of their objectives as organizations dedicated to the promotion of rights, inclusion, and coexistence in diversity. In several organizations, a feeling of defeat, frustration and weariness has emerged after noting that, despite all the efforts made by civil society, policies are increasingly aggressive against migrants and refugees, with no direct and effective channels of communication with policymakers at either the state or local level. Despite this, most organizations still seem to have plenty of energy to pursue their objectives during this particularly challenging time. Their work is perceived as particularly significant insofar as, in the absence of critical voices within the main political parties and against the backdrop of the country's political drift, it advances an alternative discursive and political framework to counter racist narratives and practices that are perceived as highly widespread.

As Back and Olsen (2020) pointed out regarding the well-established Venligboerne movement, the organizations addressed in this study can generally be considered "infrastructures of dissent" (Sears 2014) that foster the capacities to articulate collective dreams and learning and enhance solidarity by means of their actions. Through their work, the entities believe they redefine the place of migrants and refugees in Danish society, promote democratic participation, and create activist and solidarity links with a particularly transformative force. The critical perspective that these associations maintain and publicly convey regarding immigration and refugee policies in the country allows them to keep alive a counter-narrative, which is reasonably believed to be a fundamental asset in raising social awareness.

For most of the organizations studied, the Danish government—and its restrictive and exclusionary policies—is seen as the main problematic actor, in line with the conclusions of Bernhardt et al. (2025) in their study of Danish organizations working in the field of migrants' rights and housing.

Our findings show that these organizations clearly identify the main expressions of ethnic and racial discrimination in the country and are

understood to act, in line with Salifu and Back's (2025) conclusions for the case of Copenhagen, as "infrastructures of solidarity" that activate acts of citizenship (Bernhardt et al. 2025), through the generation of new narratives about migrants and refugees, the development of practices of welcome, and the promotion of spaces for multicultural encounters.

To expand on these findings, future research should incorporate smaller organizations and informal groups, as well as the voices of activists without formal responsibilities. Exploring their views and concrete practices for promoting social justice and the rights of migrants and refugees would provide a more nuanced and comprehensive perspective.

Overall, this study highlights how major civil society organizations in Denmark interpret and respond to increasingly restrictive immigration and integration policies. By analysing their perspectives, the article shows how these actors understand the roots and consequences of exclusionary approaches, while positioning themselves as key agents in articulating counter-narratives grounded in human rights, inclusion, and anti-racism. Although their capacity to influence policy outcomes is perceived as limited by the organizations themselves, their role in shaping public debate, sustaining solidarity, and fostering alternative imaginaries of coexistence remains significant. In this sense, the findings contribute to ongoing debates on the role of civil society in hostile political environments, underscoring the importance of examining not only what these organizations do, but how they interpret their position and possibilities for action within increasingly constrained contexts.

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