



Recent Danish migration and integration policies

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Internationally, Denmark received bad press during the first weeks of 2016 in relation to new border controls, rules on confiscation of migrants' valuables and stricter family reunification. Other policy changes include a U-turn in integration policies following a "work first" approach that the government is negotiating with the social partners and local governments.

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Description

The number of asylum seekers in Denmark increased from 7,557 in 2013 to 14,792 in 2014 and 21,225 in 2015, with the number of unaccompanied minors increasing from 354 to 818 and 2,068. Family reunification applications increased from 7,215 in 2013 to 12,307 in 2014 and 15,986 in 2015 with, respectively, 1,593, 1,366 and 1,985 rejections. In 2015, 10,900 persons received asylum and 8,100 were reunited with families – nearly twice as many as in 2001, when Denmark received a lot of asylum seekers from Afghanistan.

Syrians are the biggest group in all categories, except for unaccompanied minors, among whom Afghanis are the largest group. Most have little or no education: only 10% of the new refugees have a medium to long education, and only 30% are employed after three years. Expenses for integration of migrants have tripled since 2013, to a budgeted €870 million in 2016 (excluding childcare, schools and health services).

The Danish Liberal minority government has introduced a series of policy changes since September 2015, aimed at reducing the number of asylum seekers and improving refugee integration. The Danish reaction to the refugee crisis has received both national and international attention.

In September 2015, a new and lower integration benefit replaced social

assistance for those who have not been in Denmark for more than seven of the last eight years. In November, the Government launched a 34-proposal asylum package. One third was adopted by a parliamentary majority (the Liberals, Social Democrats, Danish Peoples Party, Conservatives and Liberal Alliance). The package allows easier return of rejected asylum seekers, has laxer requirements for refugee housing, and offers new possibilities for the authorities to provide accommodation to asylum seekers and for the police to control foreigners' entry and stay.

In January 2016, Denmark became the last Nordic country to tighten entry access, reintroducing controls on its border with Germany in the form of random checks—and twice extending these controls. Asylum seekers dropped from about 1,200 per week in November to 640 the first week of January, with a low of 223 in the third week.

Also in January, a parliamentary majority adopted the second part of the asylum package. The most contested portions are the rules on confiscation of valuables, family reunification and shorter residence permits. As refugees who can provide for themselves financially must do so, the police can now confiscate refugees' valuables that exceed a €1,340 value and have no sentimental value. Family reunification cases now open after three years of residence, not one. Temporary

residence permits have generally been shortened.

On 11 February, the “Three-party” negotiations started amongst the government, the trade unions and the employers’ associations. The aim is to improve the refugee’s (and their family) labour market integration. Instead of teaching refugees how to live in Denmark (e.g. through courses on history, social norms, culture...) and how to speak Danish before they can work, the new goal is to get refugees into a workplace where they can learn those things. To get new refugees into private and public workplaces, the negotiating parties are discussing how to increase the employment focus in the integration measures, improve employers’ conditions for hiring refugees, and simplify and improve wage subsidies and employment services.

The “Two-party” negotiations between the government and the association of local governments run in parallel with the “Three-party” negotiations. To integrate refugees faster and better, the negotiations focus on: how to make interventions earlier in asylum centres and municipalities, allow municipalities more flexibility in how they organise housing, enrol children earlier in childcare and education, and improve the use of existing qualifications.

Outlook & Commentary

The new rules on confiscation of valuables and family reunification received a lot of bad international press – and criticism from the United Nations Commission for Human Rights (UNCHR), Amnesty International, and many Danish organisations, including the

Institute of Human Rights. Danish Foreign Minister Kristian Jensen was called to Geneva to explain the rules to UNCHR. With the Minister of Integration, he also answered questions in the European Parliament. However, the parliamentary majority in favour of the rules is unlikely to change in the medium term.

Because the stakes are high for all parties, the “Three-party” negotiations are likely to result, as planned, in a set of proposals by mid-March. As the social partners are involved, obtaining political support from a majority of parliamentary parties will be relatively easy.

The “Two-party” negotiations appear less certain, as the local and central governments stand far apart on financing. The government suggests increasing by 50% the basic amount given to municipalities receiving refugees and their families, increasing the bonus for getting a refugee into work or education by €3,350 annually, and extending the bonus period from three to five years. Unhappy, local governments point out that the budget for financing the increased basic amount and bonus are taken from funds already allocated to them. They argue that the basic amount falls far short of meeting their extra costs for housing, teaching and other refugee services. The Government, however, insist that the municipalities find the means to perform these tasks within existing local budgets.

Nationally, tackling the integration challenge is paramount, as otherwise local welfare provisions (for children, the elderly and vulnerable groups) may be adversely affected and corporatist policy-making may be called into question.

Further reading

Ministry of Finance (2016) Toward better integration
<http://www.fm.dk/publikationer/2016/samarbejde-om-bedre-integration>

Ministry of Finance (2016) Stronger integration
<http://www.fm.dk/nyheder/pressemeldelser/2016/02/en-styrket-integrationsindsats>

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