

DENMARK



# The impact of the Russia–Ukraine war on right-wing populism in Europe: The case of Denmark

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## Abstract

At the referendum held on June 1, 2022, two-thirds of the electorate (66.9%) voted to remove Denmark's opt-out from the European Union's (EU) Common Security and Defence Policy. This result was noteworthy and must be understood in light of the uncertainty and instability sparked by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which followed closely on the heels of the COVID-19 global health crisis. The populist right-wing parties in Parliament were opposed to eliminating the opt-out, arguing Denmark would relinquish decisional control in key military and security domains. Instead, these parties advocate for the strengthening of Denmark's military within the NATO alliance, fiercely opposing further development at the EU level. The impact of the Russia–Ukraine war opens new opportunities for the populist Right, whose electoral support has been waning in recent years. For example, the newly established Denmark Democrats can leverage the current situation to strengthen and consolidate their position. And the New Right and the crisis-ridden Danish People's Party can exploit the situation to gain voters' support, playing on feelings of insecurity and international crisis.

**Keywords:** *right-wing populism; opt-outs; Danish People's Party; foreign policy; NATO*

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Meret, Susi. (2023). "The impact of the Russia-Ukraine War on Right-Wing Populism in Europe. The case of Denmark." In: *The Impacts of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine on Right-wing Populism in Europe*. (eds). Gilles Ivaldi and Emilia Zankina. European Center for Populism Studies (ECPS). March 8, 2023. Brussels. <https://doi.org/10.55271/rp0016>



## Denmark's interventionist agenda

Traditionally, Danish public opinion has been reluctant to concede on the four Danish opt-outs from European Union (EU) law negotiated in the Maastricht Treaty in 1992 and subsequent treaties. The opt-out regarding defence cooperation, also known as Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), epitomizes a deep-seated and symbolically crucial matter, interpreted as a bulwark against yet more power to the EU, particularly on matters considered the sovereign domain of the nation-state. Already in the 1990s, Danes' reluctance to accept "more EU" was capitalized on by the populist Right, which aligned with the Eurosceptic Far Left and with single-issue movements against further EU integration. The populist Right, particularly the Danish People's Party (Dansk Folkeparti, DF), claims that "more EU" implies "less Denmark", leading to more bureaucracy and the loss of Danish national sovereignty. This frame was also reactivated concerning the 2022 referendum triggered by the developments in Ukraine.

Usually a peripheral issue in electoral politics, during the 2022 election campaign, defence matters were covered in 11% of Danish media reports. The corresponding figure in the previous elections was only 1% (Kosiara-Pedersen, 2023). The NATO alliance is generally viewed as a necessary and sufficient military deterrent. This sentiment is confirmed in recent public opinion surveys showing high levels of trust for the NATO alliance among Danes (Andersen et al., 2022). The trust in the NATO alliance is today higher than in the past and significantly higher than people's trust in the EU and the Danish government. Regarding trust, NATO comes just after the judicial system and the police forces. Interestingly, this is the case also across party differences, which have become less polarized on this matter, showing a change in the attitudes of the Far Left (e.g., the Unity List and the Socialist People's Party). The Russian invasion has decreased the opposition towards higher public spending in the military and rearmament, both seen as an inevitable consequence of the war. Gender, rather than party vote, marks a more significant difference. Women are much less supportive than men towards rearmament and more prone to consider diplomacy a better means of resolving the conflict.

Denmark's engagement on the Ukrainian side is almost unconditional (Henley, 2022). The same goes for supporting the sanctions implemented against Russia by the EU and helping Ukraine with weapons and military training. There is limited concern about plans in neighbouring Germany to rearm, which for historical reasons might have otherwise raised fears in Denmark. It is important to underline

that this interventionist turn in foreign policy was by no means a foregone conclusion in the Danish case. Denmark has a specific interest in maintaining peaceful relations with Russia. For one, the area of Arctic cooperation has become increasingly strategic in the past decade, which would counsel keeping military hostilities and diplomatic tensions at a minimum. It also shows that Denmark is not particularly influenced by any “small-state mentality”, which would advocate for neutrality or at least a less interventionist position.

At the same time—and contrary to other EU countries—Denmark does not depend on Russian gas (although the Nord Stream 1 pipeline also runs through Denmark’s Exclusive Economic Zone), nor is Denmark particularly affected by close geographical proximity to Russia as Finland, Sweden and Norway are. Historically the country has entertained relatively good and peaceful diplomatic relations with its neighbour to the east. This is so even with some tensions in the Cold War. Russians occupied the Danish Island of Bornholm in 1945 (after the Nazi occupiers surrendered) and stayed there until 1946 to the alarm of the Danes. And until the end of the Cold War, Denmark was a frontline NATO state in the Nordic region.

Denmark’s foreign and security policy towards Russia became more activist (Mouritzen, 2022) after the Cold War, for instance, in supporting NATO membership for the Baltic countries to secure Europe’s eastern flank and to build a more robust bulwark against any future Russian aggression. This background is essential in explaining Denmark’s unwavering pro-Ukraine support today and the country’s backing of the NATO alliance and the sanctions. However, two major and growing concerns might set the limit for Danes’ interventionism and strong support for Ukraine and could also rekindle the electoral appeal of the populist Right: the use of *nuclear weapons* by Russia and *sustained increases in energy prices* (which might, in turn, fuel further inflation and economic crisis).

Fear about economic insecurity has been exacerbated since the outbreak of the conflict. Danes are generally rather optimistic about their economic prospects and those of Denmark as a whole. Yet concern about how the economic situation will look in the near future is today greater than it was in the aftermath of the financial crisis more than a decade ago. It is particularly high among the population aged between 30 and 50, which is also the cohort more exposed to the effects of inflation, especially higher mortgage costs. Economic uncertainty adds up to an increase in socioeconomic inequality in the country and to grievances about income and decreasing welfare provisions. These perceptions could result in more robust support for populist right-



wing parties and politics, which in recent years has been dwindling. Yet this would unlikely impact the support for Ukraine and the positions towards Russia, but rather on attitudes towards cooperation with the EU on migration and economic policy.

## New opportunities for a split populist right-wing in Denmark

Over the years, the EU has adopted several significant measures and initiatives to defend common democratic principles and values. Denmark has actively worked to support this values agenda. However, Danes are less keen when it comes to EU military cooperation and foreign policy issues. The fact that the 2022 referendum abolished a 30-year-old opt-out clause is remarkable. Yet the Eurosceptic populist Right firmly opposes what it claims will only hand more power and sovereignty to the EU. Both the DF and the New Right (Nye Borgerlige, NB) have rallied against “more EU” and against revoking the opt-out. Instead, the two parties plea for stronger support to the NATO alliance as a way to guarantee the country’s military security.

This corresponds to Denmark’s strengthening of the Atlantic dimension in Danish military and foreign policy. In 2018 and again in 2019, the Danish government quickly approved the expansion of defence spending to meet the 2% of GDP floor Washington has long demanded to ensure the alliance’s military readiness. The line is maintained by the incumbent governing coalition formed after the 2022 November elections, which includes the Social Democrats, the Liberal Party (Venstre) and the newly formed Moderates. The new government pursues an interventionist approach. After taking office, it prompted all the opposition parties to support their proposal to fast-track an increase in defence spending. Social Democrat prime minister Mette Frederiksen explained in her New Year’s speech to the nation:

Europe must be stronger on its own. And Denmark must contribute more to NATO. We must bring forward investment in our defence and security [...to] reach the 2 percent that is needed and that we have promised our allies. It will require something from all of us [...]. I sense that the proposal does not have the support of everyone. But hand on heart. We cannot overcome war in Europe, the climate crisis and the challenges at home if we – each and every one of us – are not ready to do more. (Statsministeriet, 2023)

This move, especially as the “something from all of us” entailed scrapping the Day

of Prayer (Storbededag), one of the nation's public holidays, was very unpopular. It triggered strong criticism from the trade unions, the opposition parties, and different segments of the workforce. The electorate sensed the government was simply using the conflict as a pretext to scrap a public holiday. And it did so without consulting the other parties and the unions, as is the tradition in Denmark. The opposition and the unions question whether the additional spending on defence—explained as the need to sacrifice a little to meet the costs of the war and rearmament—cannot be financed through measures other than those currently on the agenda.

These recent developments have contributed to amplifying a set of dilemmas in the country, particularly among the populist right-wing parties, which are the most vocal supporters of the NATO alliance and have always pledged higher public spending in the military and defence. Their dilemma reverts to how to take advantage of the political opportunities opened by the conflict and achieve these goals without imposing additional costs on the electorate.

## The topography of Danish right-wing populism

In an update posted on his Facebook profile on February 23, 2022, Morten Messerschmidt, the leader of the DF since early 2022, articulated the party position on the Russia–Ukraine war using these words: “Russia is threatening Europe’s freedom – NATO is the answer”. He further elaborated, arguing that:

If someone ever doubted where the Danish People’s Party stands on Russia and Putin, let me put it boldly here: We stand with the NATO alliance to protect and secure Western freedom, values and ideals [including] all countries’ right to go their own way and make alliances. (Messerschmidt, 2022b)

For Messerschmidt and the DF, only a “strong NATO alliance with the backup of the United States” can provide “a convincing answer to Russian aggression”. Therefore, the party is against any attempt to create an independent EU defence force with its own command structure. This would only contribute “to strengthen the United States’ isolationist tendencies and could be fatal for the EU” (Dansk Folkeparti, n.d.).

Conditions for financing defence should be responsible and take place without a deficit on the yearly state budget. This entails that the Danish military participation should only serve Denmark’s interest and security and not act as “the world’s police



officer” (Dansk Folkeparti, n.d.). Intervention in other countries and regions deemed as strategically nonrelevant should be avoided. The party was, for instance, against the presence of Danish soldiers in Mali joining European special forces.

The party’s position on foreign and security policy above is not new. In the early 2000s, the party programme read: “Denmark should as a sovereign and free nation be part of a strong NATO alliance”, whereas the party declared itself being “against any EU involvement in the military and defence”, contending this field must only be managed at national level (arguing thus for an increase in military and defence spending), and internationally coordinated by the NATO alliance (Dansk Folkeparti, 2001). Morten Messerschmidt reiterated the party standing against Putin and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, thus responding to the two-fold purpose of distancing from politically harmful pro-Russian views within its party and among his European allies, with whom the DF had tried to forge a stronger Far Right alliance during the 2019 European Parliament elections. Uncomfortable, albeit restricted, are the pro-Russian and pro-Putin standpoints uttered publicly by outstanding party MPs, such as Søren Espersen and Marie Krarup. The latter was the most problematic case the party had to deal with since she consistently stood on her pro-Russian positions (Kristensen, 2022) after the invasion and despite going against the party line. Krarup eventually exited the party at the end of February 2022, also because she disapproved of the new party leadership.

The DF’s internal disputes had begun before the Ukraine conflict, triggered by the remarkable drop in voters’ support in 2019 and again at the 2021 elections. These electoral losses provoked mounting dissatisfaction with Kristian Thulesen Dahl’s leadership, ending with his resignation in 2021. The electorate blamed him for not taking government responsibilities after the party’s triumph in the 2015 elections (Meret, 2021b). In this sense, the Russia–Ukraine conflict posed another challenging issue on the agenda of the already internally troubled and divided party. Besides, the relations with some of the parties in the Identity and Democracy European Parliament group, holding ambiguous positions vis-à-vis Putin and Russia (e.g., Lega, the Front National and the Alternative for Germany) contributed to aggravating the picture. From the outside, the DF has since 2019 been in competition with the NB, which coopted stricter positions on asylum and immigration and by the Social Democrats’ turn to the right on immigration (Meret, 2021a).

The DF leadership shift, with Morten Messerschmidt taking the lead amid internal party disagreement and criticism, occurred only a month before the

Russian invasion of Ukraine. The DF activated a “reputational shield” to respond to the new crisis, drawing from its long-standing support of the NATO alliance and its opposition to EU military and defence cooperation. Another aspect of the party’s approach to confront Putin’s regime and regain voters’ support was “values”, centred upon preserving liberal democratic values, the principle of sovereignty and Europe’s Christian heritage. The party is also relatively more open towards the need to take in war refugees from Ukraine, bluntly asserting that, despite Ukraine’s proximity, “there is clearly a huge difference if it is Christian Ukrainians who come into Denmark, rather than say [refugees] from Somalia or all other possible good people from a Muslim country” (Volsing, 2022).

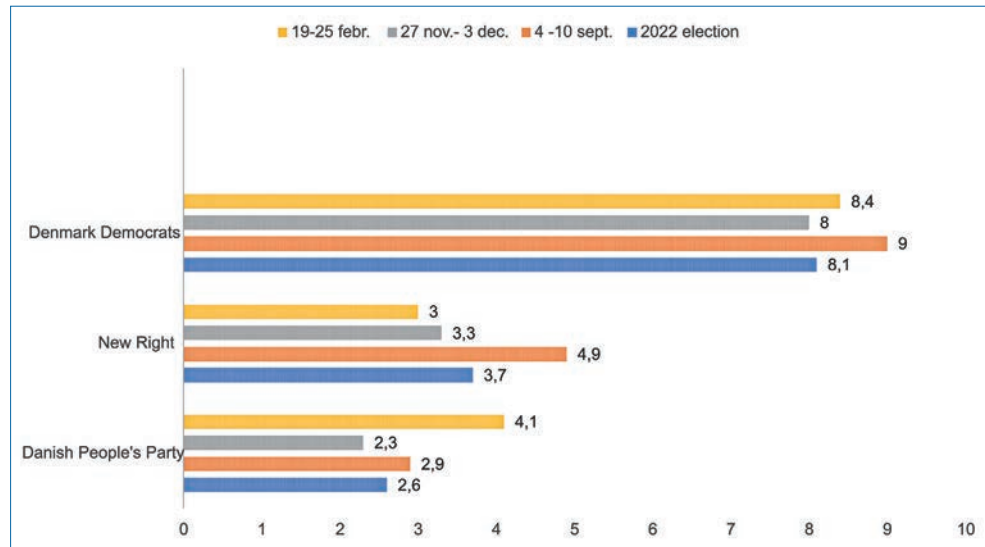
The NB is another populist right-wing party in the political opposition in Denmark, but being formed only in 2015, it is much younger than the DF. Apart from the strongly neoliberal agenda, the NB subscribes to similar (albeit not identical) positions as the DF on other issues. On the Russia–Ukraine war, NB arguably holds an even harsher tone in terms of a stronger interventionist conviction and an anti-European policy that still urges Denmark’s exit from the EU. In a blog published on the party website on the day of the Russian invasion on February 24, 2022, today former party leader Pernille Vermund criticized both centre-left and centre-right governments for having “neglected Danish military and defence” over the years, thus preventing the country from meeting the 2% of GDP target pledged to the NATO alliance and, endangering Denmark’s national security and ability to react (Copenhagen Post, 2023). The New Right’s opinion about Russia is straightforward: Russia has developed into a dictatorship with expansionist ambitions that threaten the Baltic and the Arctic regions and, ultimately, Denmark. The only option for the country is to strengthen its position within the NATO alliance.

The newly launched party, the Denmark Democrats (DD), formed in June 2022 by integration minister Inger Støjberg does not yet have a straightforward programme on matters of foreign policy, military, and defence are still unwritten (Krog, 2022). Støjberg is a former Liberal MP, known as a hardliner on immigration and integration politics, who was impeached and later convicted for unlawfully ordering the separation of young asylum-seeking spouses. Nevertheless, her party, the DD, gained a respectable 8% in the 2022 elections. It is believed to be the standby for voters who are discontent and frustrated with the status quo, amongst them several former DF supporters and supporters of former MPs. Støjberg has also expressed her preference for helping Christian Ukrainian rather than Muslim refugees.





Figure 1. Voting intentions for right-wing populist parties in Denmark (2022)



Source: Compiled by the author based on data from Voxmeter (<https://voxmeter.dk/meningsmalinger/>)

Despite being among the most interventionist parties, also the DF, the NB and the DD oppose the government's recent proposal to fund the increase in military spending by eliminating the Day of Prayer (Storbededag) from the Danes' holiday calendar. The decision is sensitive, and while most parties in the opposition agree with the purpose (more money for the military), the means to achieve it has become contentious. For instance, the approval has been made as a condition for accessing the future financial negotiation for the military and defence. Furthermore, the proposal comes just before the 2024 negotiations over collective labour bargains, making it particularly problematic among trade unions and workers who see the costs primarily borne by the working class.

But the abolition of one of the remaining Christian public holidays also speaks directly to the populist right-wing parties, which foreground the apparent waning interest in Denmark's Christian traditions and cultural heritage. This allows right-wing populists to stoke fears about a nation threatened from within (by a detached political elite and a growing Muslim problem) and without (by EU integration, Russian expansionist politics and increasingly unstable global governance). As Morten Messerschmidt articulated on his Twitter account in December 2022 (Messerschmidt, 2022b)

To abolish the Day of Prayer is simply madness. We should not change our traditions and holidays in the name of rationalism. And yes, it is a holy day (!) that replaced the earlier Catholic sacred days. Hands off Danish traditions.

## Conclusion

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has triggered long-term consequences on Danish domestic politics by encouraging more interventionist positions and creating the conditions for the future increase of public spending and the reform of the Danish military. However, this came at the cost of welfare standards and levels of trust. The conflict has strengthened the country's support for the NATO alliance, drawing Denmark closer to the United States and its allies. Denmark is a member of both NATO and the EU, yet it has always felt much closer and more loyal to the first on military and defence matters. The result of the 2022 referendum precludes changes in this pattern, likely in the longer term.

But the war in Ukraine also speaks to the right-wing populist voters, to their growing economic and societal concerns and grievances. Primarily it can represent the return to narrower understandings of the nation-state, of safety and to the call to bring forces together to defend the country's borders, security and welfare. However, it also contributes to creating new threats, sparking Russophobia and anti-immigrant sentiments, legitimated by the fear of what the future might bring in terms of economic, societal and cultural crises. These are issues that the populist Right already knows how to mobilize and capitalize upon. In this sense, the European answer will be fundamental to prevent the return of nationalist and protectionist movements.

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