

*A Pragmatic Euroscepticism***Highlights**

- ★ The Danes are generally happy with the EU's level of economic integration and are proponents of furthering the integration of the single market. However, they are sceptical when it comes to the EU's federal trimmings and EU process standards in social and employment policies.
- ★ Issues, such as roaming costs, CO2 emissions, and asylum hold the potential to show the Danes and other Europeans the interrelatedness of many of today's challenges. Despite this, there is currently little public awareness that these issues have anything to do with the EU.
- ★ The Danes' support for the EU is grounded in the pragmatic perception that the EU is a necessary and cost-efficient relationship for a small, continental country. Yet, Denmark displays a sovereignty-based euroscepticism, which means that they prefer an EU whose decision-making favours a strong role of the Council, that is the Member States.

**Building Bridges project**

This paper is part of the Building Bridges Paper Series. The series looks at how the Member States perceive the EU and what they expect from it. It is composed of 28 contributions, one from each Member State. The publications aim to be both analytical and educational in order to be available to a wider public. All the contributions and the full volume *The European Union in The Fog* are available [here](#).



## About the authors

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## About Building Bridges

Called "Building Bridges Between National Perspectives on the European Union", the project aims to stimulate the public debate around national experts on the relationship between their Member State and the EU and on the future of the Union. This project confronts their visions with others' from different member states, but also those of people from different horizons via workshops in Warsaw, Madrid, Paris and Brussels, which took place in 2015 gathering experts and local citizens.

The project is coordinated by the French Institute of International Relations (Ifri) with three major partners: the Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM), Real Instituto Elcano and EUROPEUM—European Institute for European Policy. The project has also benefited from the support of institutes in each Member State.

You can find all the information and publications about the project at this address: <http://www.ifri.org/en/recherche/zones-geographiques/europe/projet-building-bridges>.



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## **What does your country hope to gain from its membership to the European Union?**

Through its EU membership, Denmark hopes to gain access to a broader and deeper single market. This is evidenced by its support of the Juncker Commission's agenda on digitalisation of the single market, the removal of obstacles to the free movement of services, and a focus on trade agreements, most notably with the United States.

The Danes are generally happy with the EU's level of economic integration and are proponents of furthering the integration of the single market. However, they are sceptical when it comes to the EU's federal trimmings and EU process standards in social and employment policies. As such, high levels of public support in Denmark for EU membership obscure a degree of euroscepticism, as attested to by the continued presence of three Danish opt-outs from key areas of EU cooperation (on Justice and Home Affairs, the Euro, and Defence).

The Danes have been, and continue to be, amongst the most eurosceptic populations in the EU when it comes to questions of ceding (perceived) sovereignty to Brussels. Danes, for instance, react the most negatively in the entire EU to the Eurobarometer question surveying attitudes to the idea of federal union. In 2014, when this question was last polled, 74% in Denmark were against this prospect, compared to a mere 34% on average in the EU as a whole.

The federal elements of European integration constitute the thorniest issues in the eyes of the Danes. As a result, mainstream politicians typically try to accommodate voters' preferences by showing support for proposals that have a predominantly economic focus, such as ways to support and even strengthen

the single market; but hesitate on issues with a predominantly political focus, such as endeavours to build a more social Europe or to expand the scope of qualified majority voting. Federalist rhetoric on, for instance, a "European army" or "EU taxes" is also typically opposed.<sup>1</sup>

The Danes also tend to be critical of the possibility of majority voting in the Council and of moves towards more "Social Union". There is no contradiction between this sovereignty-based euroscepticism and the high levels of support for membership itself. The Danes want intensive European cooperation, but they want it on predominantly economic affairs - except for when it comes to Denmark's participation in the Euro.

Denmark greatly acknowledges the crucial need for common solutions and European leadership so that the EU and Denmark can move out of the economic crisis. Since the beginning of the crisis, the Danish perception has been that the austerity measures taken by the EU were necessary. With this in mind, the general belief has also been that Germany should continue to exert leadership in the EU's economic governance, as has happened throughout the crisis.

A more cautious note has been struck in recent debates on furthering EU economic governance, such as the establishment of a banking union or the creation of euro-bonds, where a clear national position has not yet been formed. On the banking union, for instance, the Danish Parliament has taken a "wait-and-see" approach in order to see how it evolves before deciding on whether or not Denmark should join in.

**Do you think that the European Union appears to be a clear project in your country? If not, what are the main reasons?**

Overall, the European Union appears to be a clear project in Denmark, although there are, of course, differences of opinion across political parties and population groups. There is broad agreement among the Danish mainstream parties and voters that EU membership is a good thing. There is strong backing for the EU's single market, as long as it concerns the free movement of goods, services, and capital. However, it is a different matter when it comes to the free movement of people with regard to EU citizens' access to social benefits in Denmark and debates about building a European Social Union. The current Danish Liberal minority government, for instance, supports British Prime Minister David Cameron's attempt to introduce stricter rules on the ability to send child benefits abroad.

The topic of curbing non-Danish EU citizens' access to Danish benefits, particularly those from Central and Eastern Europe, was widely discussed ahead of the European Parliament elections in 2014. The radical right Danish People's Party, Denmark's second largest party, has been particularly successful in bringing the issue of welfare benefits onto the media's agenda and pushing the mainstream parties (such as the Liberal Party and the Social Democrats) to take a more restrictive stance on the matter. Mainstream pro-European parties have become receptive towards some of the arguments made by the Danish People's Party and have taken a more critical EU line when it comes to EU citizens' access to Danish welfare benefits.

There is no clear position on border control (Denmark's participation in Schengen), where the Danish People's Party wants to reclaim border controls, while the mainstream parties are in favour of continued participation in Schengen. Due to the current Danish Justice and Home Affairs (JHA) opt-out, Denmark participates on the basis of an intergovernmental agreement but not on a supranational level.

Other than a clear unwillingness for the Danish people to join the Euro and hesitancy towards EU citizens' access to Danish benefits and Danish participation in Schengen, the Danes are very supportive of its EU membership and access to the single market. EU membership is thus seen as a remarkable economic benefit for Denmark, although the Danes become withdrawn when there are talks about moving towards a more federal union.

**Which degree of integration seems adequate to the position and ambitions of your country both politically and economically?**

Denmark's approach to the EU is characterised by pragmatism: Typically, the existing level of integration meets with broad political consensus, but Denmark rarely demands additional integration. New policies are supported if they are deemed necessary for maintaining a cost-efficient Union. First and foremost, Denmark takes part in European cooperation because it makes good sense from the political and economic perspective of a small country with a land-border with Germany. Cultural, historical, and idealistic considerations play second fiddle.

This has been the situation right from the outset. To understand Denmark's EU ambitions, we need to understand its rationale for joining the cooperation in the first place. Free from a history of recent authoritarianism or a severe World War II legacy, Denmark's path to EU membership in 1973 was wholly tied to that of the United Kingdom (UK) – a major trading partner. Denmark applied to join together with the UK in 1961, withdrew its application as soon as French president de Gaulle vetoed UK membership, and reapplied in 1967 when the UK was able to reapply.

Politically and economically, Denmark's ambitions were initially modest and entirely focused on the single market. The first fifteen years of membership were even characterised by a largely hesitant political elite. Doubts about the advantages of cooperation led the Danish government of 1986 to call a voluntary referendum on Denmark's participation in the Single European Act. The result, a reassuring yes, marked a turning point.

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 together with a broad public support for European integration led the centre-left and centre-right political parties to adopt a pro-integration stance. This situation still characterises Danish politics today. A tangible outcome of the broad pro-EU consensus is a written cross-party agreement to steer Denmark as close as possible to the core of the EU.

Had it not been for the Danes' unexpected rejection of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, leading to the adoption of four Danish EU opt-outs, Denmark might have enjoyed a long spell as one of the EU's foremost supporters. However, the no-vote cemented political awareness that there was a widespread, diffuse and elusive euroscepticism amongst the Danes that only supported integration to a

certain extent. Still today, this impression continues to tie the hands of the pro-EU elite.

As a result, recent Danish governments tend to wholeheartedly support existing cooperation but take a conservative stance on the need for additional integrative steps. Public opinion seems to support this approach. For the past several years, the Danes have been among the populations of the EU, who are the most supportive of membership itself but the most opposed to any move perceived to be leading towards a more federal union.

Throughout the mid-1990s and early 2000s, new treaties, including the Amsterdam Treaty of 1997, which received a successful public vote, and the Nice Treaty of 2001, have been justified to the Danes as necessary steps to accommodating a Union that was expanding in size – Denmark being among the most fervent supporters in the EU of the 2004 enlargement to ten Central and Eastern European countries.<sup>2</sup>

However, other integrative steps, notably the single European currency, which took shape during the same period, were not seen as necessary or attractive developments and did not meet the same permissive consensus in Denmark. The Euro was decisively rejected in a referendum in 2000 as one integrative step too far, after a very emotional campaign focused on the symbolic value of the Danish Krone.

An old saying has it: If something happens once, it never happens again. If something happens twice, it always happens again! The fact that the Danish voters voted no twice (resulting in a major defeat to the government and established parties), has firmly rooted the perception in Denmark that there are, quite simply, limits to how far European integration can go in the eyes of the population.

In terms of the current EU agenda, Denmark's position towards, for example, the banking union and a common migration policy, are likely to be one of hesitancy or even rejection, while positions towards, for example, the Digital Single Market or closer energy cooperation, are positive. Crudely put, the perception of which level of integration is seen as adequate in Denmark depends to a large extent on whether or not a new integrative step is seen as a move too far in the direction of a more federal union.

**According to you, how could we strengthen the idea of belonging to a common European public sphere among your national citizens?**

“Realist” definitions of a common European public sphere envision an environment where citizens feel connected to citizens in other EU countries, and participate in joint discussions on European topics, displaying willingness to exchanging views as fellow Europeans, rather than as isolated national entities.

As such, a precondition for a European public sphere to exist, let alone to be strengthened, is the presence of a European mindset in the various EU Member States. How well developed is the Danes' European mindset?

For decades, Eurobarometer has surveyed whether or not people feel that they are citizens of the EU, and whether they see themselves as being exclusively their own nationality or also European. The Eurobarometer poll from July 2015 shows that 74% of Danes feel that they are citizens of the EU (the EU average is 67%). 58% of Danes see themselves as being both Danish and European (the EU average is 52%).

On the one hand, these figures suggest that a large number of Danish citizens already feel

that they belong to Europe. There seems to be a rather widespread presence of a European mindset in Denmark. In fact, in Denmark, the sense of belonging to Europe, at least on these two indicators, is more developed than in most other EU Member States.

On the other hand, a non-negligible amount of Danes continue *not* to see themselves as EU citizens – that goes for about one quarter of the population. An even larger proportion of Danes continue to see themselves as “Danish only”, even when presented with the option to answer “nationality and European” – this holds for 34%.

Crudely put, with Denmark's EU membership, all Danes are citizens of the EU. Likewise, by definition, all Danes are Europeans. In this light, let us turn to the question of how the idea of belonging to a common European public sphere can be strengthened in Denmark.

In light of most Danes' pragmatic approach to European cooperation, this achievement would need to involve at least three tangible developments.

First, the Danes would, to a larger extent, need to see the rest of Europe as a relevant, important, and necessary forum for deliberation. Issues of concern to the everyday lives of Danish citizens would need to have clear and tangible links to the everyday lives of other European citizens. Sharing with and learning from citizens in other corners of Europe would have to be experienced as a cost-efficient way of going about meeting one's own ends.

The European Union can play an important role in facilitating a European public sphere. Its policies, for instance, on roaming costs, energy independence, CO2 emissions and, as we witness at the time of writing, asylum and migration, are clearly of cross-border

relevance and impact on the everyday lives of many citizens.

Such issues have the potential to show to the Danes and other Europeans the interrelatedness of many of today's challenges. But currently there is little public awareness that these issues have anything to do with the EU. A majority of Danes do not think that there is a connection between, for example, EU membership and improved consumer rights when buying goods in another Member State; or cheaper use of mobile phones when travelling in another Member State.<sup>3</sup>

There is a need for improved EU communication to demonstrate the importance, the rationale and the impact of joint decisions.

Some may argue that a phenomenon such as asylum and migration is playing a divisive, rather than a facilitating, role when it comes to the possible development of a European public sphere. Nationalist parties have surged in several Member States over the past years, including in Denmark, where the Danish People's Party came second in the June 2015 national elections with 21% of the vote. Often these parties advocate fiercely for the resurrection of borders between EU countries. The increasing prominence in recent years of such populist-nationalist parties across the continent is an indisputable fact. However, in terms of our definition of a European public sphere, this does not preclude its development in the EU. Rather, the contrary could be said, given that the populist trend is indeed common to a host of EU countries today. Similar concerns can be expected to be present across the electorate in these Member States. The challenge for the development of a European public sphere is to find a way to increase deliberation across these populations.

This brings us to the second necessary element for the Danes to be able to partake in a European public sphere. Social media has, to a large extent, provided the tools for easy cross-border deliberation, but significant language barriers prevail on all sides of the borders. Although somewhat proficient in English, there exists a large number of Danes across all age groups who cannot be expected to readily engage in deliberation on European affairs in any language other than Danish.

Nevertheless, as Danish schools have started to introduce the English language to children much earlier today than even 20 years ago, and there has been a similar tendency in many other European countries, a "common language" is becoming increasingly prevalent across Europe. Quite independently of political communication efforts, younger generations may, therefore, automatically come to witness a European public sphere to a greater extent than the present generation.

Finally, familiarity with other European countries would help. At present, there is still only a limited inclination amongst a majority of Danes to consider the prospect of working, living or studying in a different Member State. Around 9 out of 10 Danes do not foresee any of these possibilities happening in their own lives. This is likely to dampen the likelihood that these Danes will feel a natural inclination to take part in a European public sphere.

The gradual increase in the availability of educational and cultural exchange programmes across Europe (such as the Erasmus programme), combined with the social media frenzy that often happens in connection with pan-European shows and sports events, may lead to a growing number of people gaining first-hand experience of other EU countries and populations.

(When) Will it happen? The EU, pro-European Danish politicians, English-language teachers, public figures (such as former football player Michael Laudrup), and other cultural persona can only go so far in forging a European public sphere in pragmatic Denmark. However, judging by developments over the past two decades, things are moving in that direction. Time, by itself, will likely play the role of the most powerful driver in facilitating the idea of a European public sphere to the 5.3 million citizens of the small kingdom of Denmark.

### **Which policies would you deem essential to conduct at the EU level in order to better legitimise the European project?**

The sovereignty-based euroscepticism of many Danes is currently not “activated” because there is no pending treaty change or major new project that requires Danish participation. As a result of the Euro opt-out, and the Justice and Home Affairs opt-out, Denmark is neither required to join the new banking union nor adhere to decisions concerning the relocation of asylum-seekers and migrants from Greece and Italy. However, this sovereignty-based euroscepticism was recently activated when the Danish electorate voted “nej” (no) to changing the current Danish JHA-opt-out to an opt-in model, similar to the British and Irish model, in a referendum on 3 December 2015.<sup>4</sup> Those campaigning for a “no-vote” won because the Danes perceive national sovereignty and EU cooperation as a zero-sum game. The idea behind the vote was to empower the Danish Parliament to choose, on a case by case basis, which EU JHA laws it wanted to be a part of. However, the formal handing over of sovereignty was deemed to be unacceptable by those voters who rejected changing the current opt-out.

Danish euroscepticism is evenly represented across social divides. There is a slight underrepresentation of well-educated people among the no-sayers, but other factors such as income, age, gender and geographical situation do not sufficiently explain the scepticism of society at large.

As set out previously, the Danes’ strong support for the EU is grounded in the pragmatic perception that the EU is a necessary and cost-efficient relationship for a small, continental country like Denmark.

The policies that justify this relationship most precisely in the eyes of the majority of Danes have to do with the internal market, trade agreements (including the TTIP), climate change, and the environment. Danes support EU policies that allow the EU to speak with a stronger voice globally and to address security issues, such as the fight against organised crime and terrorism.

These are the policies that many Danes would like the EU to focus on, and which confer legitimacy on the EU in Denmark.

Overall, the EU enjoys high levels of public support in Denmark. According to the latest Eurobarometer poll, 75% of Danes are convinced that their country would not fare better outside of the Union. In terms of legitimacy through public support, the situation is not bad. The current mix of EU policies, it would seem, is more or less acceptable to a majority of Danes.

In terms of policies that could “delegitimise” the EU in the eyes of the Danes, we can think of EU decisions that affect core areas of the Danish “way of life”. This encompasses EU decisions perceived to dictate the workings of the Danish welfare system (e.g. on more Social Union, or on the access to welfare benefits by



migrant workers), as well as largely symbolic decisions – if, for instance, the EU were to ask Member States to fly the EU flag on public buildings. Eurobarometer 83 (Spring 2015) asked just this question, and the Danes were by far the population the most opposed to this idea across the EU. There was even a margin of 15 percentage points between the 15% of Danes, who thought flying the EU flag on public buildings was a good idea, and the 30% who thought so in the rather eurosceptic Great Britain.

Contrary to what some might expect from a country that prides itself on its democratic traditions, a strengthened role for the European Parliament, or the idea of the European Citizens' Initiative (where one million signatures across seven Member States will require the Commission to consider a proposal for new legislation) are not met with

enthusiasm amongst the Danes. On the contrary, the Danes are the population in the EU where fewest wish to see a strengthened role for the EP, and where fewest foresee that they will want to make use of the citizen initiative.

In line with our finding that Danes share a strong sovereignty-based euroscepticism, we may speculate that this is due to most Danes preferring decision-making powers in the EU to rest with the Council of Ministers, in other words with the Member States.

For now, as mentioned above, the vast majority of Danes would prefer to remain inside the European Union. Perhaps, in a union marked by tremendous diversity, this is the most important success criterion that most leaders should strive to maintain.

## Endnotes

1. Catharina Sørensen, "Love me, love me not... A typology of public euroscepticism", *SEI Working Paper*, No. 101, *EPERN Working Paper*, No 19, 2008, <https://www.sussex.ac.uk>.
2. Catharina Sørensen, *A conceptual analysis and a longitudinal, cross-country examination of public scepticism towards the European Union*, PhD Thesis, Copenhagen University, 2007.
3. European Commission, Eurobarometer, No. 80, November 2013, questions D8.2 and D8.3, [http://ec.europa.eu/public\\_opinion/](http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/).
4. Catharina Sørensen, "To be in, or to be out: Reflections on the Danish referendum", *EPIN Commentary*, No. 29/10, December 2015, <https://www.ceps.eu>.