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# From Euro-Criticism to Euro-Skepticism

## The Danish Left at a European crossroads

**Christian Gorm Hansen & Reinout Bosch , 20.04.2019**

*Facing both national and European elections before the summer, the political situation in Denmark is opening up. An apparent decline of the far right is connected to the Social Democrats who have successfully taken over harsh immigration policies. The EU remains a marginal topic but as Brexit is unfolding, support for the union seems stronger than ever. In this environment, the dominant far left party runs its own European parliament campaign for the first time thereby opening up to new strategies as others seem increasingly redundant.*

Election season is in. Denmark braces itself not only for the European parliamentary elections in May, as the center-right government led by Prime Minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen from the Liberal Party (Venstre) also sees its term in office expire in June at the latest. Supported by the anti-immigrant Danish People Party (Dansk Folkeparti), the government has ruled the last four years with minor disturbances but as elections loom, the situation is set to change.

As the main opposition party, The Social Democrats (Socialdemokratiet) now seem to benefit from a long-term strategical wager, slowly moving their position regarding immigration policies to the right, whereby they have reclaimed former social democratic voters from the Danish People Party.

As for now, the illustrious workers party that instigated the Danish welfare state has apparently succeeded in shifting the focus of the public to more classical social issues, where they are stronger, at the expense of the Danish Peoples Party that sees its first serious decline in public support since its foundation in 1995.

These changes are bound to affect the elections for the European parliament as well.

## **The absence of EU**

With elections closing in, the main electoral themes are also taking form. The Social Democrats are currently running a campaign calling for Denmark's return as an international green superpower (if it was ever one), while the Conservative Party (Konservative), a part of the government, presently uses huge billboards boasting to push through a new climate law (an initiative they ironically have just voted against in the parliament). The focus on climate as a political high priority marks, for the first time in at least a decade, the decline of immigration as the most important subject of the public political discussion. A Gallup poll from February thus showed that 57 percent of the interviewed ranked climate as a more urgent challenge than immigration, a development that observers described as never seen before in Denmark.

This, however, in no way means that the immigration question has disappeared from the political scene, neither that the current government has refrained from passing harsh immigration legislation that continues to draw international headlines. What is news flash, however, is the fact that it no longer seems to be the paramount factor for the outcome of elections ahead.

The ever much-appraised Danish welfare state is as always a pivoting point of political debate. As in other EU member states, economic austerity and budget regulation dictated from Brussels has shown itself in a Danish context as cutback demands forcing shifting governments through the years to reduce expenditures invested in the welfare state.

As areas of political struggle, climate, immigration and social welfare are all intrinsically linked to the EU, and, if any, these questions cannot be solved on a national level – least of all in small countries such as Denmark. Paradoxically, the EU remains a fringe subject in political debates preceding the elections ahead, and while it is usually not among the most popular subjects, it is almost completely absent at the moment.

This holds historical explanations. Traditionally, EU-criticism has been stronger in Denmark than in other European countries, especially on the left. Unlike pro-EU parties such as the liberal party and the Social Democrats who primarily has worked to promote their policies inside the EU institutional framework, the Danish left has followed a different line.

When the country decided to join the European Community (EC) in 1972, opposition was organized across political parties and opinions in the so-called Peoples Movement Against the EC (Folkebevægelsen mod EF), organized and build up primarily by the Communist Party but supported by a broad segment of the Danish population. Ever since, the far-left in Denmark has used the Peoples Movement Against the EC (later EU) as a platform to run for European parliamentary elections thus working to promote the core demand of the Peoples Movement, namely the immediate withdrawal of Denmark from the EU.

As such, EU as a political theme across the political spectrum was ever subject to a discourse critical regardless of political affiliations – a fact that might explain its peripheral role in public debate ever since.

## **Visions of a more social union**

Much of this is likely to change. For the first time since 1972, the majority of the organized far-left ultimately abandoned the strategy of supporting the Peoples Movement Against the EU, when the Red-Green Alliance (Enhedslisten) chose to run independent candidates for the European parliament for this year's elections.

This shift reflects a fundamental change in the attitude of the left towards the European Union, and touches upon a fundamental dilemma regarding leftist conception of the EU in general. The Red-Green Alliance has hitherto held an extremely EU-critical "leave-position" towards the union, originating in the fundamental (ideological) position that the EU is, and always has been, a tool for the ruling classes of Europe. Following this, the reasoning has been that changing the EU from the inside was a Sisyphus task which completion was barred by the founding capitalist statutes of the union. Therefore, the only option was working for a withdrawal, while simultaneously fighting for labour interests within the EU.

Such EU-criticism of the left run on par with the country's relationship with the union. The Danish situation has been peculiar in the European context, as it is the only country that did not ratify the Maastricht treaty, when a small majority rejected the treaty in a referendum in 1992. The following year, a new referendum accepted a new treaty only because it incorporated four opt outs, where Denmark continued within the union while not collaborating on issues regarding justice, citizenship, military and monetary issues (the Euro).

The popular resistance against the political establishment's attempt of further integration with the EU showed itself in subsequent referenda when the Danes voted against the Euro in 2000, and the cancelation of the justice-opt out in 2015. The latter marked the last time the EU was effectively at the center of the political debate, and with 53 percent of the electorate rejecting the change put forward by the main political parties, the popular reluctance to see more power go to Brussels was altogether clear.

The political situation in Britain seems to have changed all of this. With amazement, the Danish public has joined the rest of Europe as spectators of the farce that is Brexit, leaving the Danish public with a lacking appetite of following in the same direction. Never has support for a "remain-position" been stronger. This has had implications for the position of the left.

The traditional approach of working within the Peoples Movement Against the EU was that of the popular front, where socialist locked arms with bourgeois and petty-bourgeois layers of society in a unified rejection of a supranational union. Consequently, this strategy meant restraining the anti-capitalist critique of the left in favor of national-democratically founded demands, and has since 1992 in effect been a defense of the Danish opt-outs. Such an ideological compromise coexisted in a situation where the left continually held the de facto leadership of the Peoples Movement, and parliamentarians elected to the European parliament the last decade where in fact members of the Red-Green alliance.

Even so, a critique of this position was always present within the Red-Green Alliance. Skeptics in the party leadership argued that the lack of a socialist perspective in the European work left an important flank open. By running on an independent platform, they felt that the Red-Green Alliance would grow in importance as a parliamentary party, and would gain a platform from where a socialist critique of the EU could be communicated. The party adopted this new strategy at its annual convention in 2016.

In continuation of this decision, debates were held inside of the party on the question of the union. Although the former leave-position has not been abandoned, there was a growing recognition of the necessity of changing EU and its regulations from within its institutional framework – albeit still working to weaken and abolish the union in its current form. Such a Euro-skeptic "remain-position" now seems even more politically opportune, as the consequences of the British leave vote as mentioned has had a significant impact on the opinion of the Danish electorate.

Consequently, the leadership of the Red-Green Alliance decided in February to – at least for the moment – ditch the demand for an immediate referendum of a so-called “Daxit”, leaving the Peoples Movement Against the EU as the sole promoters of such a policy. As such, the Red-Green Alliance has moved towards a more Euro-skeptic position thus working along similar lines of its allies in the European Left, where the strategy is to change the EU and its workings towards more social and economic equality.

Apart from the organizations described, two more parties to the left of the Social Democrats are running for the EU parliament. The Socialist People's Party (Socialistisk Folkeparti) has since the early nineties abandoned its EU-critical position, and is now, along with The Alternative (Alternativet – a green progressive petty-bourgeois party) one of the most EU-positive parties in the country.

Taking a strong internationalist outset, both parties wish to work within the EU to tackle main societal questions stressing that neither immigration nor climate change can be solved from an exclusive national stance. With the Red-Green Alliance leaving its Euro-criticist position, all parties on the left is now promoting EU-policies that aims to create a more solidary EU through a strong focus on promoting climate policies, social justice, and a more progressive international taxation system.

Initial polling shows that all will be represented in the European parliament with the Peoples Movement Against the EU, the Red-Green Alliance and the Socialist People's Party each getting one MEP, and the same goes for the Social-liberal Party (Radikale Venstre). The three biggest parties in Denmark (Social Democrats, the Liberal Party and the Danish Peoples Party) split the remaining ten seats.

## **A Lilliputian dilemma**

From a European perspective, the most remarkable change in the political situation is the apparent abrupt decline of the Danish Peoples Party. This is certainly notable as the party from its nationalist platform usually turns its EU-skepticism unto its own advantage at the European elections in the same way as seen in other European countries.

The difficulties faced by the Danish Peoples Party have a number of origins. As a matter of public concern, the party's European parliamentarian group is riven by scandals regarding double-dealing

with EU funds. At the home front, it sees itself under political pressure after supporting the current government for the last four years. Though the party has succeeded in getting through a number of draconian measures aimed at immigrants, crowned by the so-called “shift in paradigm” regarding Danish immigrant politics, it has been unable to deliver in other areas such as social welfare.

With the adoption of the immigrant paradigm shift, the Danish Peoples Party furthermore has made its own nationalist position mainstream, effectively making all parties at the parliament from the Social Democrats to the right to vocally support their nationalist ideas. Politically, this has resulted in a political landscape with blurred lines, and brought other issues to the fore in the parties' pursuit of stronger political profiles respectively. Traditionally, the EU-skepticism the Danish Peoples Party has acted as a pointer for its apparent defense of the welfare state, but this position is no longer as strong as it was earlier. As Brexit seems to indicate, an exit from the EU does not in itself spell for a stronger nation state with the opportunity to preserve an economical basis of a welfare state model such as the Danish.

This has opened up possibilities for a renewed EU-critique from the left. Many of its strongest positions are bound up on international dilemmas, and point towards solutions beyond the nation state. While the break with the Peoples Movement Against the EU could possibly point towards a more internationalist and less isolationist approach of the Red-Green Alliance, its position in the national parliament increasingly focuses on the defense of the Danish welfare state on par with the other parties of the Danish left wing. What remains to be seen is whether the newly adopted Euro-skeptic reformist EU-strategy could strengthen such a position in the view of the electorate. The first indication of this will be the European elections in May.

Generally, the practical importance of the opt-outs is increasingly negated by bilateral dealings between the Danish government and the EU. This leaves Denmark in an ambivalent position with the opt-outs placing the country with a special status within the union, but without influence on important decisions concerning central aspects of union policies. Such difficulty of upholding Denmark's real independence affects the Lilliputian sentiment of the Danish public, seemingly concerned about the potential inability to deal with worldwide problems on a national scale while at the same time wanting to secure the survival of the Danish welfare system.

As a result, a new public sentiment might be seeing the light of day – a sentiment that begins to open up towards a more European orientation, which could take the EU and how to change it from within to the heart of societal discussions within the kingdom of Denmark.

**Kilde:** <https://www.rosalux.eu/topics/euro19/from-euro-criticism-to-euro-skepticism/?L=316>