



Hasanuddin Journal of Strategic and International Studies

ISSN: 2963-1394 (Online) Journal Homepage: <https://journal.unhas.ac.id/index.php/hjsis/>

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To cite this article:

Estriani, H. N., & Qomaria, N. (2024). Examining the Securitization of Refugees in Denmark: The Impact of Right-Wing Political Agendas. *Hasanuddin Journal of Strategic and International Studies (HJSIS)*, 3(1), 21-31.

To link to this article:

<https://doi.org/10.20956/hjsis.v3i1.42260>

Published by Hasanuddin University

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Examining the Securitization of Refugees in Denmark: The Impact of Right-Wing Political Agendas

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Abstract

The influx of migrants into Europe in 2015 has led to a sharp rise in support for right-wing groups. Denmark is a prime example of this tendency, as the Danish People's Party (Dansk Folkeparti, DF) scored its highest-ever election success and emerged as the second-largest party in the 2015 Denmark's general election, greatly impacting immigration and refugee decisions. The dominance of right-wing parties has, in turn, influenced Denmark's policy direction towards asylum seekers and refugees. Anti-refugee and anti-asylum seeker narratives propagated by these parties reflect elements of securitization employed by the Danish government in addressing refugee issues. This study aims to examine the changes in Denmark's government policies toward refugees. It seeks to analyze the elements within the concept of securitization that underpin the shifts in anti-immigration narratives particularly post-2015. This assumption is based on two factors; the anti-immigration policies advocated by right-wing parties and the perception of refugees as threats to security.

Key Words

Securitization, Refugee, Right-Wing, Denmark, Anti-Immigration

1. Introduction

European countries' policies toward asylum seekers and refugees are closely tied to the influence of Right-Wing Parties (Far-Right). The massive influx of refugees into Europe since 2014 has been accompanied by a rise in support for right-wing parties across the region, including in Denmark. In the 2014 European Parliament elections, the dominance of right-wing parties in the Danish Parliament highlighted significant public support for anti-immigration rhetoric in Denmark. The Danish People's Party (Dansk Folkeparti, DF) secured 26.60% of the vote, marking a substantial increase from the 2009 European parliament elections, where they garnered 14.80% of the vote (EU, 2014). In the 2015 Danish general Election, the Danish People's Party (Dansk Folkeparti, DF) became the second-largest party in the Folketing and became the Folketing's second-largest party and achieved its best-ever election result (Danish Parliament, 2015).

Since then, Denmark has become a Scandinavian country that adopts strict and firm policies toward refugees and asylum seekers, contrasting with the human rights-oriented and liberal values traditionally upheld by Nordic countries. A decade later, in the 2024 legislative elections, the Danish Parliament (Folketing) was dominated by the Socialist People's Party (Socialistisk

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Folkeparti, SF) and the Social Democrats (Socialdemokratiet). Interestingly, despite no longer holding a majority in parliament, the influence of right-wing parties in Denmark remains persistent. This paper aims to analyze the influence of right-wing parties on refugee policies in Denmark specifically and Europe more broadly. Using securitization theory, the study examines how right-wing parties in Denmark depict asylum seekers and refugees as threats, thereby shaping Denmark's policies on handling refugees within its borders.

2. Analytical Framework

The perception of refugees as a source of threat to the stability and security of host countries aligns with the securitization theory proposed by the 'Copenhagen School,' including scholars such as Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Thierry Balzacq. The concept of securitization has been widely applied in analyzing a country's foreign policy, particularly in framing ordinary issues—such as HIV/AIDS, transnational crime, terrorism, and minority rights—as security concerns by construing them as existential threats. According to McDonald (2008), the securitization of migration issues witnessed a significant rise following the 9/11 attacks in 2001. This shift has amplified the tendency to frame migration and refugee movements as pressing security challenges, shaping policy discourses and responses in many countries.

In the context of traditional security, defining security is relatively straightforward as it is often tangible and observable. For instance, the presence of foreign military personnel intimidating local residents indicates the need for a military force to counteract the threat (Wæver, 1989). However, this becomes more complex when addressing non-traditional security, particularly in determining what issues can be classified as security concerns. In this regard, Wæver argues that security, in theoretical terms, can be understood as a speech act. This means that a speech act emphasizes the use of language or statements in claiming an issue as a security matter. Specifically, it occurs when state representatives frame an issue as part of the security agenda and assert that it requires special handling to prevent the issue from escalating (Wæver, 1989).

This concept was further developed by the Copenhagen School to analyze how an issue becomes framed as a security concern, or how securitization occurs regarding specific issues. An initially ordinary issue can become extraordinary when labeled as a security threat. If securitization refers to the process of framing an issue as a security matter, desecuritization - is its opposite—returning an issue once considered a security threat to normalcy, described as “the shifting of issues out of emergency mode and into the normal bargaining processes of the political sphere” (Buzan et al., 1998). In essence, by refraining from placing an issue on the security agenda, it is classified as desecuritization (McDonald, 2008). This process seeks to depoliticize issues that were previously treated as existential threats, allowing them to re-enter standard political and societal discourse.

According to Buzan and Wæver, securitization is defined as “The move that takes politics beyond the established rules of the game and frames the issue either as a special kind of politics or as above politics. Securitization can thus be seen as a more extreme version of politicization” (Buzan et al., 1998). Based on this definition, politicization and securitization have distinct contextual meanings. Buzan and Wæver view securitization as an extreme form of politicization. Securitization is the result of securitizing actors constructing and framing an issue as an existential threat. This process transforms an issue that could otherwise be managed through ordinary measures into one requiring extraordinary responses beyond normal procedures. In other words, securitization is a construct by securitizing actors who frame an otherwise non-threatening issue as a security concern that is perceived to endanger the existence of a particular entity.

In securitization, an issue framed as a security threat becomes a priority issue. As a result, securitizing actors employ extraordinary measures that go beyond standard procedures. However, according to Buzan and Wæver, securitization is deemed successful only if the audience perceives and accepts the issue as a security threat. If the issue framed as an existential threat is recognized only by the securitizing actor, it cannot yet be classified as securitization but rather as a securitization move (Buzan et al., 1998). The distinction lies in whether the audience accepts the framing of the issue as a genuine security concern; without this acceptance, the process remains incomplete.

The success of securitization constructed by securitizing actors can be evaluated through three criteria (Buzan et al., 1998). First, the issue is perceived as an existential threat; second, an emergency action is deemed necessary to address it; and third, efforts to manage the issue involve bypassing established political rules. These elements illustrate how securitization elevates an issue to a priority status requiring extraordinary measures. Furthermore, securitization is typically carried out through a speech act (Buzan et al., 1998). In this context, Balzacq (2010) argues that the core idea of the speech act can be expressed simply through statements that exaggerate the actual conditions of reality. This rhetorical approach amplifies the urgency and severity of the issue, persuading the audience to accept it as a security threat requiring immediate and exceptional responses.

According to Buzan and Wæver, securitization involves three key actors: securitizing actors, referent objects, and functional actors (Buzan et al., 1998). First, securitizing actors, these are the individuals or groups who carry out securitization by framing an existential threat as a danger to a specific entity. Securitizing actors typically use speech acts to construct and communicate the threat. This category often includes political elites, government officials, lobbyists, and pressure groups, who leverage their positions to influence public perception and policy. Second, referent objects, these are the entities perceived to be at risk if the issue is not addressed. Referent objects often refer to nation-states, communities, or territorial integrity. They represent what is being "protected" in the securitization process. Lastly, functional actors, these are parties not directly involved in the securitization process but whose actions or presence significantly influence the dynamics of the securitized issue. Functional actors may shape the context or the impact of the securitization without being central to the narrative or decision-making process. These actors collectively play essential roles in shaping, validating, and responding to the securitization of an issue. The perception of the Danish media towards refugee are part of these functional actors.

3. Results and Discussions

3.1. Right-Wing Parties and Xenophobia in Europe

Research on the securitization of refugees in European countries has significantly increased following the massive wave of refugees from conflict-ridden Syria to Europe in 2015. Denmark is one of the countries that has seen a trend of policy change, transitioning from initially not considering refugees as a threat (desecuritization) to adopting a securitization approach in response to the migrant and refugee crisis in Europe. Muslims, in particular, began to be viewed as an existential threat, increasingly associated with extremism and terrorism (Hansen, 2011). In response to the migrant crisis, political elites in Europe began to perceive refugees and migrants as threats to both individual and national security. The concerns regarding identity and terrorism, and their links to migrants and refugees, intensified significantly after the events of 9/11. As a result, many European countries implemented border controls and imposed restrictions on refugees' movements (Kabata & Jacobs, 2023). This illustrates the connection between migration, security, and the securitization measures taken to address perceived threats.

However, despite the fact that many European countries have started to implement securitization policies, Jakešević and Tatalović (Jakešević & Tatalović, 2016) argue that this is not the case for all countries. While the securitization of refugees has largely occurred at the regional level, not all countries have adopted such policies at the national level. One such example is Croatia, which has not yet viewed the refugee issue as a threat, primarily because it still holds the status of a transit country, rather than a destination for refugees. Over the past decade, the policies of European countries towards asylum seekers and refugees have also been influenced by the increasing support for Right-Wing parties. The dominance of the National Rally party led by Marine Le Pen in France, or Reform UK in the United Kingdom, and Alternative for Germany (AfD), shows that the popularity of these parties has not waned since the refugee crisis began in Europe in 2015. At that time, Europe, led by German Chancellor Angela Merkel, implemented an open-door policy, accepting millions of Syrian refugees in 2015. However, this policy changed as support for Right-Wing parties in several European countries, including Denmark and Hungary, began to rise.

Right-wing parties, with their nationalist views, are often associated with more radical policies compared to left-wing (liberal democratic) parties. The most prominent radical policy stemming from their nationalist stance is the anti-immigrant agenda, which opposes the presence of immigrants in European territories. This anti-immigrant policy typically targets all immigrants, including legal migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. The rise in support for right-wing parties in Europe is largely a response to the massive wave of migrants and refugees entering Europe, particularly since 2015. Looking back, the 1960s marked a turning point with the arrival of non-European immigrants from South Africa and the Maghreb region, who came to Europe primarily as laborers (Haas, 2008). Since then, globalization has facilitated the flow of migrants and refugees into Europe. In 2015, the wave of refugees from the Middle East reignited the arrival of immigrants from Africa as well. This period marked a significant shift in European immigration dynamics, further intensifying the political debates and policies surrounding migration and refugees.

The increasing support for right-wing parties indicates a rise in xenophobia within European societies. Xenophobia itself refers to the suspicion and fear of individuals or ethnic groups considered "foreign," in this case, immigrants (Rensmann & Miller, 2010). This racist attitude towards "foreigners" is often referred to as racist violence, defined as violent acts where victims are targeted based on their ethnicity, race, religion, culture, or country of origin (Bjorgo, 1995). As more refugees and immigrants enter Europe, resistance to their arrival has grown across various sectors of European society. Among the general public, this rejection is evident through protests, demonstrations, and hostile treatment of immigrants. Meanwhile, within political elites, anti-immigrant politics has been largely driven by right-wing parties, which have gained significant support.

The anti-immigrant narrative in Europe is paradoxical, as the region faces declining birth rates and an aging population, which makes many countries reliant on migrant workers, especially in the informal labor sector. However, right-wing parties have stirred fears of a repeat of the large-scale migration wave that occurred in 2015 when former German Chancellor Angela Merkel opened the doors to hundreds of thousands fleeing the war in Syria (Temco, 2024). This paradox highlights the tension between the need for migrant labor and the growing political backlash against immigration.

3.2. Refugees and Right-Wing Parties in Denmark

Over the past decade, Denmark has been among the European countries with the lowest number of refugees. In 2024, for instance, Denmark ranked 23rd, making it one of the least accepting

countries of refugees in Europe. This is unusual, given that Denmark is one of Europe’s strongest economies and has the capacity to accommodate asylum seekers. Moreover, its neighbouring countries, Germany and Sweden, have long been the top destinations for refugees, receiving disproportionately high numbers compared to other nations (Bendixen, 2024).

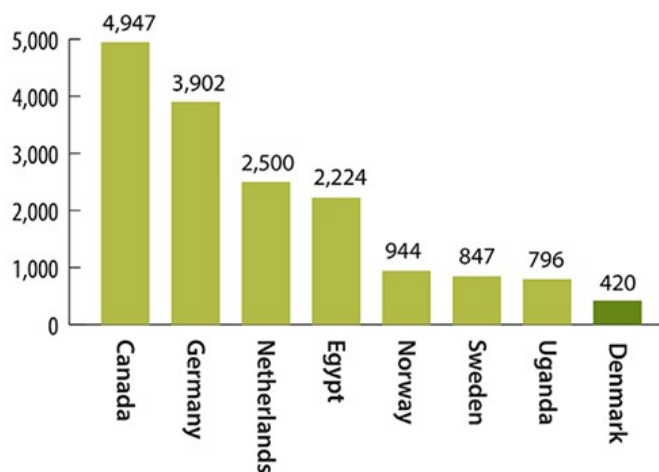


Figure 1. New Asylum Seekers Per 1 Million Inhabitants in 2023

Source: Bendixen, 2024

With 22 parliamentary seats secured by the Danish People's Party (DPP) in the 2001 Danish election, the DPP assumed a strategic position and began to exert significant influence on government policymaking, particularly in immigration policy. In 2014, the party achieved the highest number of seats in Denmark's legislative election. In the 2015 Danish election, the DPP gathered 21 percent of the vote, doubling its share from 2011, where it secured 12.3 percent, making it the second-largest party after the Social Democrats (Eddy, 2015). The strategic position held by the DPP has had a considerable impact on immigration policymaking in Denmark.

Political party	Votes	Pct.	Seats
A. Socialdemokratiet	924.940	26,3%	47
B. Radikale Venstre	161.009	4,6%	8
C. Det Konservative Folkeparti	118.003	3,4%	6
F. SF - Socialistisk Folkeparti	147.578	4,2%	7
I. Liberal Alliance	265.129	7,5%	13
K. Kristendemokraterne	29.077	0,8%	-
O. Dansk Folkeparti	741.746	21,1%	37
V. Venstre, Danmarks Liberale Parti	685.188	19,5%	34
Ø. Enhedslisten - De Rød-Grønne	274.463	7,8%	14
A. Alternativet	168.788	4,8%	9
Other	3.066	0,1%	-
Total number of votes	3.518.987		

Figure 1. Result of the Danish Election 2015

Source: (Danish Parliament, 2015)

The growing support for the right-wing Danish People's Party is closely linked to the rising number of immigrants and refugees entering Denmark. In 2015, the number of asylum seekers in Denmark reached 21,000, a significant increase from 14,815 in 2014 and 7,557 in 2013. Since

the 20th century, Denmark has received over 6 million immigrants and refugees from the Soviet bloc, Balkan states, the Middle East, Africa, and other regions. Currently, immigrants account for 10 percent of Denmark's total population (Delman, 2016). Here is a graph illustrating the rising support for right-wing parties in Scandinavian countries

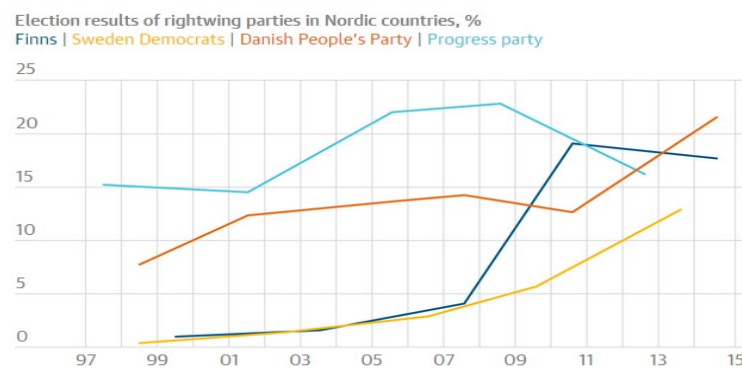


Figure 2. Election results of rightwing parties in Nordic countries

Source: Nardelli & Arnett, 2015

In the graph, the Danish People's Party stands out as the right-wing party experiencing the most significant increase in support, particularly between 2011 and 2015, compared to other right-wing parties in Norway, Sweden, and Finland. With its radical anti-immigration policies as a hallmark, the Danish People's Party has firmly positioned itself in addressing immigration and refugee issues in Denmark. These anti-immigration policies are rooted in three primary concerns: threats to Denmark's cultural and ethnic identity, security threats, and the perceived burden on the country's welfare system (Bergmann, 2017).

3.3. The Securitization of Refugees in Denmark

Denmark's zero-asylum seeker policy and its framing of asylum seekers and refugees as threats represent a clear example of securitization. In this context, the Danish government acts as the securitizing actor, engaging in securitization by portraying refugees as an existential threat to the stability and security of Danish society, which functions as the referent object. Securitization is considered successful when the securitizing actor effectively delivers speech acts that convince the referent object to legitimize the issue as requiring urgent and extraordinary measures.

In Denmark's case, securitization is the result of the right-wing parties' construction as securitizing actors, framing asylum seekers and refugees as an existential threat. Refugee issues could, in fact, be managed and controlled by the state, particularly if it adheres to the principles of refugee protection as stipulated in international law. These protection principles should be understood and respected, especially by countries that have ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, including Denmark. However, the anti-refugee narratives promoted by the Danish government have escalated the issue of asylum seekers and refugees into a matter requiring extraordinary measures. This means that Denmark's securitization is a result of its government's constructed framing of refugees—who inherently pose no danger—into a security issue perceived as threatening the existence of the state's entities. This framing justifies extreme and emergency actions, such as Denmark's policy of processing refugee status determinations in third countries outside Europe.

Looking back, anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim narratives in Denmark were evident during the events of 2005. At the time, a prominent Danish newspaper, *Jyllands-Posten*, faced strong

criticism, particularly from the Islamic world, for publishing a series of cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad. This incident was seen as a provocative act of xenophobia and racism against Muslims in Europe. In response, the Danish People's Party (DPP), also known as Dansk Folkeparti (DF), a right-wing party in Denmark widely known for its anti-immigrant, anti-Islam, and anti-multicultural policies, justified the publication as an exercise of "free speech." DPP leader Pia Kjaersgaard at the time made a controversial statement, calling Islam "a cancerous ulcer and a terrorist movement." She further claimed that the Islamic world lacked civilization and argued that Western civilization was the only true civilization, stating, "there is only one civilization, and that is ours" (Schwarz, 2006). These statements from the DPP provided justification for the growth of Islamophobia, xenophobia, and racism in Denmark.

In addition to being perceived as a security threat, immigrants were also framed as a burden to the welfare state. This sentiment was reflected in Denmark's controversial 2016 policy, which allowed authorities to confiscate cash and valuables from asylum seekers to cover their living expenses while in Denmark. The policy stipulated that amounts exceeding 10,000 kroner (approximately \$1,453) could be seized (Hume, 2016). This amount is significant, especially given the financial hardships faced by asylum seekers upon arrival.

In 2015, Nye Borgerlige (The New Right) emerged as a right-wing rival to the Danish People's Party (DPP). Founded by Pernille Vermund, the party advocates for far stricter anti-immigration policies compared to the DPP (Panagiotopoulos, 2017). For instance, the party proposed banning hijabs in schools and public institutions and accepting only immigrants and refugees processed through official UN agencies who already have stable employment. Vermund articulated their stance by stating, "To stop the process of asylum cases in Denmark, to demand that foreigners are able to provide for themselves, and of course to deport criminal foreigners after the first conviction" (Euronews, 2016). With approximately 3,000 supporters, Nye Borgerlige managed to collect 20,190 petition signatures, meeting the minimum requirement to participate in Denmark's 2019 parliamentary elections. The rise of Nye Borgerlige not only signalled intensified competition for the DPP but also underscored the growing dominance of anti-immigrant rhetoric among right-wing parties in Denmark.

The fear of threats to local culture and ethnicity can be traced back to statements made by the Danish People's Party in early 2017. The party declared that non-Christian immigrants must participate in Christmas and other Christian celebrations to be considered part of the Danish people. A DPP spokesperson told the *Jylland-Posten* newspaper, "*We believe that those who come to this country should make as much as possible to become Danish people, and to do that, you need to understand Christianity, which is important to Danish people*" (AP, 2016). The cultural and religious differences between immigrants and local residents have perpetuated the stigma that immigrants remain as "outsiders" (*them*) rather than becoming part of the national identity. Even when immigrants perceive themselves as having undergone "nationalization" and integrating into the community, they are often still not regarded as part of the collective "we" (Wardhani, 2011). This dynamic contributes to the ongoing difficulty for immigrants to be fully accepted as members of Danish society.

In this context, immigrants are often perceived as being responsible for the deterioration of security conditions, terrorism, high unemployment rates, and rising prices of basic goods. Such stigma and criminalization form the basis for acts of racial discrimination against immigrants (Taras, 2009). Moreover, several terrorist attacks in European countries such as Belgium, France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and Sweden are frequently associated with acts carried out by radical Islamist groups. As a result, the perception of immigrants as a security threat to the local population becomes difficult to dispel.

The popularity of right-wing parties subsequently declined in the 2019 Legislative Election, which was won by Denmark's Social Democratic Party. Some anticipated a shift in migration policies under the Social Democrats, with the possibility of more open policies toward asylum seekers and refugees. However, the government maintained the strict anti-immigration policies inherited from the right-wing parties. This was evident in the statements of Mattias Tesfaye, a member of the Social Democratic Party and Minister for Immigration and Integration in 2021, who expressed his desire for Denmark to accept 'zero' asylum seekers. Similarly, Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen emphasized that "It is crucial for Denmark to have control over the influx of asylum seekers... Too many people of non-Western descent have come here without an interest in integrating into Danish society. I am glad that this has been stopped, and for that, we owe much to the Danish People's Party as the main driver" (Tumler & Osgard, 2021).

In the same year, Denmark passed legislation allowing the country to process asylum seekers and refugees outside Europe. According to the law, asylum seekers arriving in Denmark would be directly sent to a third country for their refugee status to be processed (Schipani & Milne, 2021). This reflects Denmark's consistent policy goal of achieving zero asylum seekers, accepting only refugees through the UN quota system. Anti-immigration statements and narratives persisted in subsequent years. For instance, in 2023, Minister for Immigration and Integration Kaare Dybvad Bek stated, "The government's goal remains to transfer the asylum application process to partner countries in collaboration with the European Union" (Birkebaek & Birkebaek, 2023). This statement followed the enactment of the law enabling third-country processing of asylum seekers, alongside discussions about Denmark relocating refugees to third countries, such as Rwanda. This was based on an agreement between Denmark and Rwanda to transfer asylum seekers and refugees arriving in Denmark to African countries, including Rwanda.

3.4. Ghetto Plan: An Emergency Action?

The surge in refugees and asylum seekers in Denmark prompted the country to develop policies closely tied to addressing refugee-related issues. In 2018, the Danish government introduced the Ghetto Plan, a term first used by right-wing parties on March 1, 2018. It was presented in a publication authored by the Danish People's Party, the Conservative People's Party (Det Konservative Folkeparti), and the Liberal Alliance, titled "Ét Danmark uden parallelsamfund – Ingen ghettos i 2030" (Regeringen, 2018). In English, it translates to, "A Denmark Free of Parallel Societies-Eliminating Ghettos by 2030." This term was quickly adopted by the media as the 'Ghetto Plan' (Tsfazion, 2020) and it became widely recognized across Denmark, further intensifying anti-immigration narratives.

The government defines ghettos as areas meeting three criteria: first, if the percentage of residents aged 18-64 who have not been engaged in work or education for two consecutive years exceeds 40%; second, if the percentage of residents aged 18 or older identified as involved in crimes related to weapons or narcotics within two years exceeds 2.70% (BBC, 2018); and third, if the percentage of immigrants and asylum seekers from non-Western countries exceeds 50% of the total population (Varsi, 2020). In addition, several initiatives have been designed under the Ghetto Plan. These initiatives are outlined in 22 measures categorized into four main focus areas. The first involves the gradual demolition of ghetto housing areas. The second focuses on controlling who is allowed to live in these areas. The third involves increasing police patrols, imposing stricter laws for criminal offenders, and enhancing public safety. Lastly, the Ghetto Plan emphasizes improvements in education for children and youth (Overgaard, 2018). The Ghetto Plan, which discredits non-Western ethnic groups under the guise of "reform," is part of the government's emergency action. Regarding the Ghetto Plan, the Danish People's Party has also responded by labelling non-Western immigrants and asylum seekers as "parallel societies"

existing in Denmark. They are framed not only as a burden but also as a threat to Danish society (Sorensen et al., 2024).

The parallel lives lived by most immigrants—who have integrated and become permanent residents—are often a last resort due to the high property prices in Denmark. On the other hand, refugees face significant challenges in finding employment, as the refugee integration system into Denmark's labor market is relatively weaker compared to other Nordic countries like Sweden and Norway. The implementation of the Ghetto Plan can once again be described as an emergency action, driven by the high perception that refugees and asylum seekers pose an existential threat to Danish society. The Ghetto Plan aligns with Denmark's zero-asylum seeker policy, which frames the refugee issue as a security threat capable of destabilizing Denmark's security, thus necessitating 'emergency action'. From this, it is evident Denmark has successfully securitized refugees through speech acts performed by securitizing actors. The narratives endorsed by these actors, particularly the majority of the Danish Parliament, have led to the implementation of anti-refugee policies. These include emergency measures such as the establishment of ghettos and other restrictions on refugee entry into Denmark.

4. Conclusion

It can be concluded that the stance of right-wing parties toward immigrants and asylum seekers has increasingly contributed to the rise of xenophobia, which has already taken root in Danish society. When the government acts as an agent providing justification through statements that lean toward xenophobia, Islamophobia, and racism against 'foreign' residents, it leads to a regression in the values of multiculturalism, tolerance, and respect for human rights that have long been upheld by the European Union. In this context, although the European Union is actively working to regulate its regional immigration system, the case of Denmark illustrates that, ultimately, the state remains the decisive actor in formulating its immigration policies. Consequently, Denmark's openness toward immigrants in the future will heavily depend on the political situation and conditions within the country.

Conflicts of Interest

The author has disclosed that there are no potential conflicts of interest related to this article's research, authorship, or publication.

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