INTERVIEWS 09.07.2024

‘There’s a broad consensus in Denmark around migration’

Minister for Immigration and Integration Kaare Dybvad Bek on Denmark’s restrictive migration policy and its efforts to prevent parallel societies

You are a stout critic of Europe’s migration policy, pointing to the large number of illegal crossings at the EU’s external borders. How dramatic is the current situation?

Right now, we have the largest number of irregular arrivals coming to Europe, even larger than in 2015. If we don’t change the situation now, it’s going to have an immense impact on most states as well as local communities. Austria, for example, had around 170 000 asylum seekers in the past two years. It’s not possible for a nation to process all of these claims. Many people arrive from countries that have a very low recognition percentage. This cannot continue. In Belgium, many people live without proper housing, especially in Brussels. In the Netherlands, they have very high numbers, and in Switzerland and Germany as well. Pirmasens, a town with 40 000 inhabitants, has already taken in 2 000 refugees. If you are supposed to give people proper housing, education, language training and the possibility to enter the labour market, these are numbers that are socially unsustainable in the long run.

In 2018, Denmark launched the so-called ‘anti-ghetto-law’, aiming to reduce the number of people of ‘non-Western origin’ in designated ‘vulnerable areas’ to less than 30 per cent. Have you seen any positive impacts over the last few years?

Just to make that clear: When the Social Democratic government came into power in 2019, we removed the word ‘ghetto’ because it’s a very loaded term. Apart from that, I believe that we’ve had some very positive developments in a series of vulnerable housing estates. For the largest area in Copenhagen, we’ve gone from around 40 per cent of the people not being in the labour market to around 21 per cent, that’s a huge difference. The impact on local communities can hardly

be overstated. It's important that the children that grow up in these areas – it doesn't matter if they have a foreign or Danish background – can make something of their lives.

In many cities, it's not only about changing the demographics of an area. To improve living conditions, we are tearing down some of the *Plattenbau* from the Sixties because of the bad architectural quality of the housing estates. In Copenhagen, they specifically support schools in the most volatile areas, so they have twice the amount of funding for each kid compared to more affluent areas. It's not only about stricter policies, it's also about investing in welfare schemes in these areas to make sure that the next generation has a bright future.

Currently, the Court of Justice of the European Union is holding a public hearing to review the legality of the law. Many describe it as 'cruel' and criticise that it 'fuels xenophobia'. What is your response?

I think it's a bourgeois, socialist view. In Denmark, this kind of rhetoric comes from people who live in affluent, interesting, creative neighbourhoods that don't have any of the burdens that integration means for local communities. Who is paying the price for a more liberal migration policy? It's mostly the working-class districts where a lot of migrants live. When I see this kind of criticism, I wonder if these people ever lived in an area that has this kind of composition of residents. If they had, they would understand that the foundation of coherent societies with a high level of public welfare is trust and mutual understanding.

How significant was the migration shift for the Social Democrats in Denmark?

2015 has been a very defining year, for the Social Democrats, but also in general for the political landscape in Denmark. We had a very large number of migrants and refugees. On TV, we saw migrants and refugees walking on the highways coming from Germany, many of them heading to Sweden. These pictures created a sense of loss of control. And this has changed our view. We believe that temporary residency is very important. This means that once people no longer have the need for international protection, they should return to their country of origin or former country of residence.

Which is the most important integration measure newly introduced by your party?

We made a lot of changes so far, but I believe that the efforts to prevent parallel societies in vulnerable areas are a very important part. We also have a more effective return policy. Our government is taking

this very seriously. It's crucial that democratically agreed principles are respected. The governments in Europe need to take a more proactive stance and make sure that people who don't have legal residency leave the country. That's what we have done in Denmark in the past five years. What is happening in Germany and many other countries is that people who don't have the need for international protection are staying, although they are already rejected as asylum seekers. When your return policy is under control, *then* you can have an open and legitimate discussion about how many refugees you can handle. But this discussion needs to be based on democratic rules and principles.

Proponents of a stricter migration policy on the Left often point to Denmark since the Social Democrats have been so successful in recent years. However, in the European elections, your party did not perform as well as before. What are the reasons from your point of view?

The main reason for this bad election is the fact that, for the first time, we are in a coalition with our historic opponent, the Liberal Party Venstre. This is comparable to a grand coalition in Germany, however, Danes are not used to this kind of government. We often have minority coalitions. For most Danish citizens, the Social Democratic Party is a proponent of the welfare state, while the right wing is advocating for more tax cuts. But now, we have to govern together. I think this confused a lot of people.

What role did migration play?

Migration was not a very big topic. In general, there's a broad consensus in Denmark around migration, with only a few parties on the far right and the far left outside that consensus. But I would say 80 to 85 per cent agree that on the one hand, we cannot accept an endless number of refugees, and on the other, we are of course part of international conventions – human rights, refugees' rights – and we strictly have to respect these as well.

If you look at the far right in Denmark, they peaked in 2015, when they got 21 per cent of the votes. At the last parliamentary elections, they were below three per cent. During our time in government, we were able to dismantle or at least marginalise the populist right — a big achievement.

But looking at the other side of the political spectrum, the Green Left got the most votes in the European elections...

Concerning migration, they almost have the same position as we do. When we have propositions in parliament, they mostly support the government. On some issues, they are even stricter than we are, for

example regarding Mohammed cartoons. They want it to be compulsory for all students to learn about the cartoons, while we think that this needs to be more of a local decision.

Both Germany and Denmark face a shortage of skilled workers. If a country is tough on irregular migration, doesn't regular migration also become less attractive?

I don't understand why it should be difficult for Germany to attract skilled people. Anywhere in the world, Turkey, Tunisia, Albania, countries that are not as wealthy as Germany, if you ask people where they want to go to work, they say Germany. In Denmark, we have thousands of people coming each year from European countries like Romania, Poland or Spain as well as, for example, from India to work here. They are people who have very high skills.

We have a threshold of €50 000. If you are from outside the European Union and your income is below that threshold, you can't enter. We want to avoid competition in low-skilled jobs. We try to attract high-skilled people and this is what we're getting at the moment.

How do you perceive the debate in Germany about migration? And what course in migration policies would you recommend Social Democrats in Germany and other European countries?

It's important to have a discussion around the number of people who can come and still have a functioning welfare state — especially for Social Democrats. The Bundestag and other parliaments in Europe should debate how many people their country can integrate. We should not conduct this debate from a nationalist or culture war perspective, that someone is overwhelming your country. All this '*Untergang des Abendlandes*' [Decline of the Occident/West] rhetoric is not useful in any sense. I think you need to underscore what I believe is the fact that it's always the people at the bottom that take the hardest hit from large and uncontrolled migration. If the German welfare state is suffering because of economic pressure, it's the people who have low-skilled jobs and low income who pay the price for that. Not the people in Starnberg or Charlottenburg. I think that this social analysis of migration is very important and needs to be made apart from all this nationalistic rhetoric that is also part of the German debate.

I'm not an advisor to the SPD; they should make their own policy. We're talking about the oldest and most important Social Democratic Party in the world. But I would say any country in Europe can have a more functioning return policy. I believe the first step is to make sure that in a democracy, rules have to be obeyed. If someone is not

allowed to be in the country, they can't stay. In my opinion, this is quite an uncontroversial thing to do.

This interview was conducted by Nikolaos Gavalakis.



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