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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Euroscepticism in Denmark

[version 1; peer review: 1 approved with reservations]

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v1 **First published:** 03 Jun 2026, **6**:189
https://doi.org/10.12688/openreseurope.23660.1
Latest published: 03 Jun 2026, **6**:189
https://doi.org/10.12688/openreseurope.23660.1

Abstract

Denmark's relationship with the European Union is characterised by a balance of active participation and notable ambivalence, as evidenced by its longstanding opt-outs from core supranational areas. This environment has provided fertile ground for populist movements on both the radical right and the left, which leverage Euroscepticism to influence domestic policy without advocating outright withdrawal.

This study offers a qualitative analysis of the political discourse and strategies of three key populist actors in Denmark: the Danish People's Party (DF), Nye Borgerlige (NB) and the Danish Democrats (DD) on the radical right, and the Red–Green Alliance (EL) on the radical left. It examines how these parties articulate their Eurosceptic positions and assesses the responses from mainstream political factions.

Findings indicate that Danish Euroscepticism functions as a flexible, "soft" political resource. The radical right (DF, NB) frames the EU as a threat to cultural homogeneity, border security, and welfare sovereignty. Conversely, the radical left (EL) critiques the EU as a technocratic structure that enforces neoliberal constraints, undermining democratic accountability and ecological progress. Mainstream parties, particularly the Social Democrats, have effectively neutralised the electoral threat posed by radical-right populists by adopting more restrictive immigration and welfare policies, thereby internalising Eurosceptic priorities into mainstream governance.

Euroscepticism in Denmark rarely functions as an existential project for EU withdrawal. Instead, it serves as an instrumental proxy for broader domestic conflicts over sovereignty, welfare, and democratic control. While populist actors have successfully shifted mainstream policy, their influence remains structurally constrained by robust public and elite support for continued European integration.

Open Peer Review

Approval Status ?

	1
version 1 03 Jun 2026	? view

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Any reports and responses or comments on the article can be found at the end of the article.

Keywords
Populism, Eurosceptisism, Denmark

This article is included in the COST Actions gateway.

This article is included in the Linking Euroscepticism and Populism (EUPopLink) collection.

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Author roles: BERGMANN E: Conceptualization; **LEDAGA-NGOUONI P**: Conceptualization

Competing interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Grant information: This project has received funding from the European Union's Framework Programme for Research & Innovation as part of the COST Action CA23102, as supported by the COST Association (European Cooperation in Science and Technology).
The funders had no role in study design, data collection and analysis, decision to publish, or preparation of the manuscript.

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How to cite this article: BERGMANN E and LEDAGA-NGOUONI P. **Euroscepticism in Denmark [version 1; peer review: 1 approved with reservations]** Open Research Europe 2026, **6**:189 https://doi.org/10.12688/openreseurope.23660.1

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1. Introduction

Denmark occupies a distinctive position within the European Union (EU). Having joined the European Communities in 1973, it is not among its founding members, and with a relatively small population of around six million inhabitants and a medium-sized economy, it does not enjoy the political weight of larger member states such as France or Germany. Despite this, Denmark has often exerted significant influence within the EU, owing to its reputation for institutional efficiency, economic stability, and active involvement in policy areas such as climate action, fisheries, and agricultural reform.

At the same time, Denmark's relationship with European integration has long been marked by ambivalence. This was made particularly visible in the 1992 referendum, when Danish voters rejected the Maastricht Treaty, prompting negotiations of a series of opt-outs covering defence, the euro, justice, and home affairs. These opt-outs have allowed Denmark to remain formally integrated into the EU while maintaining distance from core dimensions of supranational cooperation. Although this position has evolved over time, notably with the 2022 referendum in which 66.9 per cent of voters supported the abolition of the defence opt-out, debates over sovereignty, national democracy, and the limits of European authority continue to structure Danish political discourse.[1]

Against this backdrop, Denmark has also been fertile ground for the development of populist and Eurosceptic movements. Concerns about national sovereignty, immigration, welfare provision, and democratic accountability have shaped political debates for decades, even as overall public support for EU membership has remained relatively strong compared to other European contexts. Indeed, Denmark is often identified as one of the earliest cases in which post-war populist and neo-nationalist mobilisation gained significant traction, particularly through anti-immigration rhetoric and welfare chauvinism.[14,15,3]

Importantly, Euroscepticism in Denmark has rarely functioned as an existential rejection of European integration. Rather, it has been embedded within broader populist projects and deployed instrumentally to support claims about elite betrayal, national sovereignty, and the defence of "the people".[16] On the radical right, this logic has been articulated most prominently by the Danish People's Party (Dansk Folkeparti, DF) and more recently by Nye Borgerlige (NB)/Borgernes Parti (BP) and the Danish Democrats (DD), who all frame the EU as a threat to borders, welfare, and cultural homogeneity. On the radical left, the Red–Green Alliance (Enhedslisten, EL) has advanced a different form of Euroscepticism, criticising the EU primarily as a vehicle of neoliberalism and technocratic governance rather than as a cultural or national threat.

The Danish case is therefore particularly instructive. Unlike in the United Kingdom, where Euroscepticism culminated in withdrawal, in Denmark it has operated as a flexible political resource rather than a project of exit. To understand this dynamic, it is necessary to examine how populist actors have shaped Danish politics over time, how they have articulated their positions on Europe, and how mainstream parties have responded to these challenges within the constraints of continued EU membership.

The present country report was prepared as part of the EUPopLink COST Action[2] following the EUPopLink Theoretical Framework and guidelines.

2. Populist political actors[1]

Like many European countries, Denmark has experienced the presence of populist political actors, often intertwined with various forms of Euroscepticism, phenomena that have exerted a significant and lasting influence on national debates, particularly on immigration, welfare provision, national identity, and Denmark's relationship with the European Union.[4,9]

Euroscepticism features prominently in the discourse of these actors, but its intensity, scope, and ideological grounding vary considerably.[5] Danish populism illustrates the distinction commonly made in the literature between "hard" and "soft" Euroscepticism, as well as between rejection of EU membership itself and opposition to specific policies or practices of European integration.[16,14,15] This section focuses primarily on the Danish People's Party (Dansk Folkeparti, DF) on the radical right and the Red–Green Alliance (Enhedslisten, EL) on the radical left, while also addressing the role of Nye Borgerlige (NB)/Borgernes Parti (BP) and the Danish Democrats (DD), a more recent but increasingly visible radical right challenger.

[1] Following the European Parliament election on June 9, 2024, the 15 Danish mandates were distributed across the following political groups: the Socialist People's Party (*Socialistisk Folkeparti*) sits with the Greens/European Free Alliance (Greens/EFA); the Social Democrats (*Socialdemokratiet*) with the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D); Venstre, the Social Liberal Party (*Radikale Venstre*), and the Moderates (*Moderaterne*) with Renew Europe; the Conservative People's Party (*Det Konservative Folkeparti*) and Liberal Alliance with the European People's Party (EPP); the Denmark Democrats (*Danmarksdemokraterne*) with the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR); the Danish People's Party (*Dansk Folkeparti*) with Patriots for Europe (PfE); and the Red-Green Alliance (*Enhedslisten*) with The Left.

Far from being marginal actors, DF and EL have shaped Danish politics for decades. DF rose to prominence in the late 1990s and 2000s, providing parliamentary support to successive minority governments and exerting substantial influence over immigration and EU-related policies. Although its electoral strength has declined since the mid-2010s, it remains a central reference point for the study of radical right populism in Scandinavia.[15,17] EL, by contrast, has never entered government but has consolidated itself as a stable parliamentary force, articulating a radical left agenda centred on social justice, ecological transition, and opposition to neoliberalism [Missing: March; Bortun]. More recently, NB/BP has contributed to the fragmentation of the radical right by advancing a more confrontational and ideologically rigid form of nationalism.

Dansk Folkeparti (DF) Founded in 1995 following a split from Mogens Glistrup's Progress Party (Fremskridtspartiet), the Danish People's Party (DF) represents the most influential expression of radical right populism in Denmark. While the Progress Party had emerged as a tax protest movement in the 1970s before drifting toward openly anti-immigrant and culturally exclusionary rhetoric, DF marked a process of ideological consolidation and strategic moderation. Under the leadership of Pia Kjærsgaard, the party abandoned Glistrup's anarchic style and adopted a more disciplined political profile, combining cultural nationalism with a strong defence of the welfare state for native Danes.[14,11,3]

DF's populist discourse constructs "the people" as ordinary, law-abiding Danes whose cultural identity, security, and welfare are allegedly threatened by immigration, multiculturalism, and distant political elites in Copenhagen and Brussels. Immigration, particularly from Muslim-majority countries, has been framed as incompatible with Danish values and as a strain on social cohesion and public finances. This rhetoric has resonated especially with older voters and segments of the working and lower-middle classes, including groups traditionally aligned with the Social Democrats.[15,17]

Electorally, DF achieved remarkable success. After becoming a key parliamentary actor in the early 2000s, it provided crucial support to minority right-wing governments led by Venstre, thereby gaining significant leverage without formally entering government. The party reached its peak in the 2015 general election, securing over 20 per cent of the vote and becoming the second-largest party in Parliament. Its success exemplifies how radical right populism was normalised and integrated into the Danish political system.

From early on, DF adopted a strongly Eurosceptic stance. It portrayed the EU as an elite-driven project undermining Danish sovereignty, border control, and welfare protections, and played a central role in defending Denmark's opt-outs following the Maastricht Treaty as well as in campaigning against the adoption of the euro.[16,1] However, DF rarely advocated withdrawal from the EU. Instead, its Euroscepticism can be characterised as soft in practice but hard in tone: it accepted continued membership while consistently opposing deeper integration and portraying Brussels as detached from the concerns of ordinary Danes.[15] At the European level, DF cooperated with other radical right actors through the Identity and Democracy (ID) group in the European Parliament.

Nye Borgerlige (NB)/Borgernes Parti (BP) and the Danish Democrats (DD) Founded in 2015, Nye Borgerlige ("New Right") represents a more recent and ideologically sharper articulation of radical right populism in Denmark. While sharing DF's emphasis on cultural nationalism and opposition to immigration, NB departs from DF's welfare-chauvinist profile by combining identity politics with a more economically liberal agenda. It has sought to attract younger conservative and libertarian voters dissatisfied with what they perceive as DF's statism and pragmatic moderation.[13] The radical right landscape further diversified in 2022 with the founding of the Danish Democrats (Danmarksdemokraterne, DD) by former migration minister Inger Støjberg. While NB/BP pursues a more uncompromising and economically liberal line, DD has capitalized on a strong anti-establishment and decentralist profile, explicitly championing rural areas and campaigning to limit immigration. Like NB and DF, the Danish Democrats maintain a firm anti-immigration stance, but their appeal relies heavily on Støjberg's highly personalized brand of populism.

NB's platform includes demands for "zero asylum" policies, stricter citizenship requirements, and withdrawal from international conventions considered to constrain Danish sovereignty. Its Euroscepticism centres on opposition to EU migration and asylum policies, supranational legal authority, and what it depicts as illegitimate interference in national self-determination. Although NB has not formally endorsed "Dexit," its rhetoric often flirts with hard Euroscepticism, calling for a radical repatriation of powers and denouncing the EU's future trajectory toward deeper integration and multiculturalism.[14,16] The Danish Democrats express a comparable scepticism toward supranational interference, aligning at the European level with the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group to oppose deeper integration. DD frames its resistance predominantly around protecting ordinary Danish provincial life and national sovereignty from distant bureaucratic overreach.

In this sense, the emergence of both NB and DD illustrates a dynamic of competitive radicalisation and fragmentation on the right. As DF's positions were increasingly absorbed by mainstream parties, particularly the Social Democrats, NB

emerged as a challenger pushing a more uncompromising discourse, while DD quickly absorbed disaffected voters, breaking records for the fastest collection of voter signatures to become eligible to stand for election. Consequently, the presence of these newer actors has contributed heavily to the splintering of the radical right and the continuous hardening of public debate on sovereignty, immigration, and Europe.

Enhedslisten (EL) On the radical left, the Red–Green Alliance (Enhedslisten, EL), founded in 1989 as a coalition of socialist and communist parties, represents the most significant populist actor. Unlike DF and NB, EL articulates an inclusive conception of "the people," encompassing workers, immigrants, and other marginalised groups. Its political project combines social egalitarianism, ecological transformation, and a strong critique of neoliberal capitalism.

EL's populist discourse frames elites not primarily in cultural terms but as technocratic and corporate actors who dominate political decision-making at the expense of democratic accountability and social justice. The EU occupies a central place in this critique. EL has long opposed EU fiscal rules, competition law, and aspects of the single market, which it portrays as undemocratic constraints on redistribution, welfare provision, and environmental policy [Missing: Bortun; March].

Historically, EL occasionally entertained the possibility of withdrawal from the EU if meaningful reform proved impossible. In more recent years, however, its stance has shifted toward critical engagement rather than exit. Its Euroscepticism is thus best described as soft but consistent: rejecting EU policies and practices while accepting the principle and polity of European cooperation. At the European level, EL is affiliated with the Left group in the European Parliament, alongside parties such as Podemos, Die Linke, and Syriza.

3. Positions on 'Europe' and the Populism–Euroscepticism nexus

Both the Danish People's Party (DF) and the Red–Green Alliance (EL), despite their opposing ideological positions, have articulated sustained critiques of the European Union. As in other European contexts, these critiques differ markedly in their content, intensity, and normative foundations, illustrating the conceptual distinction between "hard" and "soft" forms of Euroscepticism as well as between opposition to EU membership itself and rejection of specific policies or practices of European integration.[16,14]

For DF, Europe is primarily framed through the lens of cultural and welfare sovereignty. The EU is portrayed as a threat to border control, national homogeneity, and the sustainability of the Danish welfare state. Free movement and EU migration rules are depicted as undermining the state's capacity to prioritise native citizens, while supranational legal and political authority is presented as eroding democratic self-determination. In the 1990s and 2000s, DF played a central role in defending Denmark's opt-outs secured after the Maastricht Treaty and in mobilising opposition to the adoption of the euro. During this period, its discourse often approached hard Euroscepticism, rejecting not only specific policies but also the direction of European integration as such.

Over time, however, DF's position evolved toward a more stable pattern of soft Euroscepticism. While maintaining a strongly critical tone, the party increasingly accepted EU membership as a pragmatic necessity and refrained from advocating withdrawal. Its critique focused instead on limiting further integration, defending opt-outs, and resisting EU intervention in areas such as immigration, welfare coordination, and justice and home affairs. Euroscepticism thus functioned less as a project of exit than as a rhetorical and political resource embedded in a broader populist narrative of elite betrayal, with "Brussels" depicted as distant from and unresponsive to the concerns of ordinary Danes.[15]

Both NB and the DD push this logic further and illustrate a partial hardening of Eurosceptic discourse on the Danish radical right. Their opposition to the EU is articulated almost entirely through identity-based nationalism. It demands a radical repatriation of powers, rejects EU asylum and migration policies, and frames supranational authority as fundamentally incompatible with Danish democracy and cultural survival. Although both have stopped short of formally endorsing "Dexit," its rhetoric frequently resembles hard Euroscepticism, opposing not only EU policies and practices but also the future trajectory of integration, which it associates with multiculturalism and demographic decline.[14,16] In practice, however, this stance remains instrumental, as the NB has at times sought participation in European elections and engagement within EU institutions.

EL, by contrast, articulates a fundamentally different critique of Europe. Its Euroscepticism is not grounded in cultural or national sovereignty but in concerns about democracy, social justice, and neoliberal governance. The party condemns EU fiscal rules, competition law, and elements of the single market as undemocratic constraints that privilege corporate interests, restrict redistribution, and hinder ecological transition. For EL, the EU represents a technocratic structure that limits popular sovereignty and weakens the capacity of national governments to pursue egalitarian policies [Missing: Bortun; March].

Historically, EL occasionally entertained the prospect of withdrawal if meaningful reform of the EU proved impossible. In recent years, however, it has shifted toward a position of critical engagement. Its Euroscepticism is therefore best characterised as soft but consistent: it rejects EU policies and practices while accepting the principle and polity of European cooperation. This position reflects a form of left-wing populism that defines "the people" inclusively and frames Europe as a site of elite capture rather than cultural threat.

External crises have reinforced and reshaped these positions. The COVID-19 pandemic provided new ammunition across the spectrum: DF and NB demanded stronger border controls and national supply-chain sovereignty, while EL criticised the EU's vaccine strategy and fiscal rigidity as evidence of technocratic failure. The war in Ukraine further exposed ideological divergences. DF and NB emphasised national sovereignty and NATO, though NB opposed further military aid to Ukraine and DF, while condemning the Russian invasion, opposed Ukrainian accession to the EU or NATO and urged territorial concessions as a means of securing peace. EL supported Ukraine's independence but warned against militarisation and subordination to NATO. The war in Gaza likewise polarised positions, with DF and NB stressing unconditional support for Israel and opposing recognition of a Palestinian state, while EL strongly condemned Israeli actions and framed EU inaction as a moral failure. Finally, the return of Donald Trump has been mobilised discursively, with DF and NB presenting Trumpism as a vindication of nationalist and sovereigntist politics, whereas EL warns that such developments risk legitimising authoritarianism and accelerating climate inaction.

Taken together, Danish populist Euroscepticism oscillates between radical right demands for cultural sovereignty (DF, NB) and radical left calls for democratic and economic reform (EL). It is consistently soft in practice but often hard in tone. Crucially, as in other Northern European contexts, Euroscepticism functions less as an autonomous political project than as an instrument embedded within broader populist strategies, shaped by external crises and constrained by Denmark's continued commitment to EU membership.

4. Responses to euroscepticism and consequences

Mainstream Danish parties, including the Social Democrats (Socialdemokratiet), the Liberal Party (Venstre), and the Social Liberal Party (Radikale Venstre), have traditionally maintained a broadly pro-European stance. Their responses to populist Euroscepticism have combined adversarial and accommodative strategies, reflecting both Denmark's long-standing commitment to EU membership and the electoral pressure exerted by populist actors.

Radikale Venstre has consistently defended deeper European integration and positioned itself as the most openly pro-European party in Denmark. It frames EU membership as essential for economic prosperity, international influence, and the defence of liberal democratic values. Venstre, while firmly supportive of EU membership, has adopted a more cautious tone, particularly on issues related to sovereignty, justice, and defence, often reflecting public sensitivity to supranational authority and Denmark's opt-out tradition.

The Social Democrats illustrate most clearly the accommodative response to populist pressure. While historically pro-European, the party has progressively adopted tougher rhetoric on immigration, border control, and welfare access for EU migrants, partly in response to the long-standing agenda of the Danish People's Party (DF). This shift culminated in the so-called Paradigmeskiftet ("Paradigm Shift") of 2019, which marked a decisive reorientation of Danish migration and integration policy. The new framework prioritised repatriation over integration, tightened rules for family reunification and residency, and reframed immigration as a temporary rather than permanent condition.[6,7]

Importantly, this policy shift was implemented not by DF itself but by a Social Democratic government under Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen. By adopting key elements of DF's platform, the Social Democrats effectively neutralised the party electorally while simultaneously entrenching its core ideas within the political mainstream.[8,3] This dynamic illustrates what has been described as a populist success paradox: although DF suffered a dramatic electoral decline after 2015, its influence persisted through the widespread adoption of its positions by mainstream actors.

The consequences of populist Euroscepticism in Denmark have therefore been tangible but uneven. Unlike in countries such as France or Italy, where Euroscepticism has become a central marker of populist identity, Danish populist actors have treated Europe primarily as a secondary issue embedded within broader conflicts over immigration, welfare, and national identity. Nonetheless, Euroscepticism has shaped policy outcomes indirectly. DF played a key role in maintaining Denmark's opt-outs and in pushing governments toward more restrictive positions on migration within the EU framework, while EL has consistently kept debates on fiscal rules, democratic accountability, and social Europe on the political agenda.

At the same time, mainstream parties have largely succeeded in containing Euroscepticism within the boundaries of continued EU membership. Even when adopting sovereigntist rhetoric or restrictive migration policies, they have avoided framing Europe as an illegitimate political order. As a result, Euroscepticism in Denmark has rarely escalated into a mass mobilisation for exit. Instead, it has functioned as a structural constraint on political debate, shaping the limits of acceptable discourse on sovereignty, borders, and welfare coordination without fundamentally challenging Denmark's place in the EU.

5. Conclusion

Denmark offers a revealing case of the interaction between populism and Euroscepticism. While populist actors on both the radical right and left have long shaped political debate, Euroscepticism has rarely functioned as an autonomous or existential political project. Instead, it has been embedded within broader populist narratives centred on sovereignty, immigration, welfare, and democratic accountability.

This pattern is visible across the main populist actors. The Danish People's Party (DF) played a central role in defending Denmark's opt-outs and opposing the euro without pursuing withdrawal from the EU. The Red–Green Alliance (EL) similarly criticised EU fiscal rules and democratic deficits but gradually shifted toward critical engagement rather than exit. Nye Borgerlige (NB) has adopted a sharper rhetoric that often flirts with hard Euroscepticism, yet it too has stopped short of advocating full withdrawal. In all cases, Europe functions less as an existential adversary than as a proxy for broader political conflicts.

Danish Euroscepticism has shaped opt-outs, referenda, and policy debates, while remaining constrained by broad elite and public support for continued integration. The Danish case thus illustrates how populism can profoundly reshape domestic politics, while Euroscepticism remains a persistent but ultimately instrumental force compatible with continued EU membership.

Ethics and consent

Ethical approval and consent were not required for this study, as the research constitutes a political analysis of party platforms, public discourse, and secondary academic literature rather than human subjects research.

Data availability

No data are associated with this article. This is a qualitative political analysis relying on public discourse and secondary literature; it does not involve quantitative datasets, statistical values, or analyzable images requiring replication.

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Open Peer Review

Current Peer Review Status: ?

Version 1

Reviewer Report 10 June 2026

https://doi.org/10.21956/openreseurope.25616.r75477

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This is an interesting study that engages in the nexus of populism and Euroscepticism in Denmark. There is a good overview of the stance taken by the political parties that are identified as being populist and Eurosceptic.

However, there is a need to clearly define in an objective and neutral academic manner the terms populist and Euroscepticism, and how they are to be operationalised in the context of this work.

Because the labelling of the parties as being "radical" right or left seems rather arbitrary and lacking foundation. The public may have legitimate concerns (perceived and real), which creates the demand for such political parties, which should be acknowledged.

Another point relates to the issue of the roles and effects of culture and identity in defining political outlooks and worldviews maintained by people. In line with this is the old binary political dividing line of the left-right political ideology spectrum. This seems to be exerting less influence in politics than it use to do so. What about another axis of establishment politics versus anti-establishment politics?

One last point concerning the issue of populist versus mainstream politics, there is a partial convergence of the mainstream with populist politics and policy, especially on hot issues as migration. This has forced mainstream politics, in some instances, of coopting some of those policy positions as their legitimacy was eroded and they were losing their legitimacy and constituency. Hence mainstream politics has become increasingly populist in an attempt to remain relevant politically.

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it engage with the current literature?
Partly

Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?

Partly

Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?
Yes

Are all the source data and materials underlying the results available?
Yes

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?
Not applicable

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?
Partly

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: politics, political marketing

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.