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On the project

Euroscepticism and the European Parliament elections in 2014, the EU's Neighbourhood in light of the Ukraine crisis and power relations in the EU: The EU-28 Watch project is mapping out discourses on these issues in European policies all over Europe. Research institutes from all 28 member states as well as Iceland, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Turkey give overviews on the discourses in their respective countries.

This survey was conducted on the basis of a questionnaire that has been elaborated in March 2014. Most of the 33 reports were delivered in June 2014. This issue and all previous issues are available on the EU-28 Watch website: www.EU-28Watch.org.

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1. Euroscepticism and European Parliament elections

The Election campaign: national or EU issues?

The Danish election campaign centred to a large extent on European issues, rather than on national ones. A characteristic of previous campaigns in Denmark, as well as in many other member states, has been that the European Parliament election campaign is a 'second order' contest focusing more on domestic issues than issues relevant for the EU election at stake. At the 2014 election, the debate centred on transnational issues such as environmental policy, EU economic governance and the free movement of persons. Although these issues were still debated from a national perspective, it was significant how European rather than national issues dominated the agenda.

The initiative made by the European Parliament to have EU-wide front-runners to campaign for EU Commission President, in order to further spur the transnational debate in Europe, did not, however, have any major impact on the Danish campaign. While it was mentioned as a fact throughout the campaign, it is highly unlikely that the average voter had this in mind when casting his/her vote.

The 2014 election also pointed towards a new trend of focusing more on the contents of Danish EU cooperation rather than on the form. Since Denmark has had seven referenda on the EU since its accession in 1973, where the Danes have had to vote on deepening European integration, the EU debate in Denmark has often been reduced to a 'for' or 'against' the EU. This has usually also been reflected in the European Parliament election campaigns and within the national parties. The 2014 EP election was also held alongside a referendum where the Danes had to vote on whether Denmark should join the unified Patent Court. Interestingly, the debate did not become the typical 'yes' or 'no' to the EU. Instead, the debate regarding the referendum centred on the technical advantages and disadvantages of Denmark joining the unified Patent system. The referendum on whether to join the unified Patent Court was approved by 62.5% of the votes. Thus, in turn, the Danish campaign, including the EP election campaign, took a step away from its previous narrow focus on debating EU issues from either a pro- or anti-EU perspective.

Euro-scepticism

The fact that the campaign to a lesser extent had a narrow pro/anti approach to EU cooperation did not, however, come to mean that euroscepticism was absent from the debate. Following the trend of many other member states, the anti-European parties in Denmark gained significant support.

The nationalist, right-wing Danish People's party (DPP) gained nearly 27 percent of the vote and doubled its number of MEPs from two to four. The party had led a very persuasive campaign, and also managed to bring many of its key issues to the election agenda, forcing the other parties to discuss these topics. As examples, the DPP campaigned to reclaim border controls and curb benefits to other EU citizens living in Denmark. Besides the fact that the DPP managed to bring these topics to the agenda, there was also a tendency that the mainstream pro-European parties became receptive

towards some of the arguments made and adopted a more critical EU line themselves. Most notably, the debate on Danish welfare benefits offered to non-Danish EU citizens became a major topic in the campaign, where several of the pro-European parties, such as the liberal party and the social democrats adopted a much more restrictive line than their previous policies on the matter.

Voter turnout

As in many other member states, voter turnout in Denmark is significantly lower in EU elections than in national elections. The turnout at the 2014 election was 56.5 percent. At the 2004 EP elections the overall turnout in Denmark was 47.9 percent and 59.5 percent in the 2009 elections. In comparison, the Danish state election has an average turnout rate of 82-90 percent. The explanation for the high 2009 turnout was that the EP election was held simultaneously with a referendum on the Danish royal family succession boosting the turnout to the highest level ever for a European election in Denmark. Even though the 2014 results of 56.5 percent is not a high number compared to national elections, it was still somewhat surprising as polls had predicted an even lower turnout. There is no doubt that the 2014 campaign in Denmark was more intensified than what we have seen in earlier campaigns and this may indeed have led to a higher turnout than expected.

Links:

- Christine Nissen, [The European Parliament and the case of Denmark](#), 11 May 2014.
- Mirte van den Berge, [The 2014 EP election campaign in the member states: national debates, European elections](#), 4 June 2014.
- European Parliament, [Results of the 2014 European elections: Denmark](#), 25 May 2014.

2. The EU's Neighbourhood

Future Relations with Russia

The Danish position on Russia is that it is crucial to find a diplomatic and peaceful solution to the Ukraine crisis and in this regard the dialogue track with Russia is essential to be kept alive.

Thus, while Denmark is among the EU member states supporting a rather hard line regarding sanctions, Denmark is continuously stressing the importance of keeping certain relations with Russia intact. That being said, the Danish position also strongly emphasises the security threat posed by Russia. Similarly, this approach does not question Ukraine's sovereignty rights and the official position of Denmark is that it will not at any point accept Crimea's annexation by Russia.

This position is also reflected among the Danish population where a recent opinion poll has shown that a majority of 60 percent agree that Russia poses a threat to European security and stability and that it is to be held responsible for the current conflict.

The Ukraine crisis and EU relations with Eastern Partnership countries

There can be no doubt that the Ukraine crisis has renewed the focus on and need for strong relations with the Eastern Partnership countries, also those where there are currently no prospects for the signing of an association agreement with the EU.

Though the focus has been intensified with the latest developments in Ukraine, being involved with the Eastern European countries is not a new priority for Denmark. Denmark has for several decades attached great importance to promoting stability and democracy in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus. As one of the pioneers of EU enlargement after the end of the Cold War, Denmark was also among the initiators of the establishment of the European Neighbourhood Policy. In addition, Denmark continues to run an ambitious bilateral programme of technical assistance with reforms in the Eastern Partnership countries.

Turkey and the EU

The Danish stance on Turkish EU membership was revisited in March 2014, when the Turkish President, Abdullah Gül, paid a state visit to Denmark. Here, the Danish Prime Minister, Helle Thorning reaffirmed that Denmark supports Turkey's EU membership process, while also stressing the need for Turkey to deal with its important shortcomings of fulfilling the Copenhagen criteria, such as the principles of the rule of law, fundamental rights and freedom of expression.

The visit also rekindled the critical voices against Turkish EU membership, most notably led by the nationalist Danish People's Party, which is especially critical of Turkey joining the EU.

There should be no doubt that Denmark is divided over Turkey's membership in the EU. Arguably though, the current government is more pro-Turkish than the former government, which was dependent on the support of the Danish People's Party.

Links:

- Nikolaj Rytgaard, Michael Kuttner, [Danskere: Rusland er en trussel mod freden](#), 24 April 2014.
- Peter Munk Jensen, [The EU's Eastern Partnership after Vilnius – Where do we go from here?](#), 5 December 2014.
- Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, [Relations between Turkey and Denmark](#), 2013.

3. Power relations in the EU

The role of Germany

Germany is Denmark's largest neighbour, as well as its most important trade partner, as almost a fifth of all Danish export and import is traded with Germany. Thus Denmark greatly values the importance of German leadership in Europe.

Denmark is in favour of Germany taking on a leading role in questions of European affairs, functioning as the 'very core and stable anchor in EU cooperation' as argued by the Danish Foreign Minister, Holger K. Nielsen, earlier this year during a meeting with the newly elected German Foreign Minister, Frank-Walter Steinmeier.

The general perception is thus that Germany should continue to exert leadership in the EU – in economic governance as seen throughout the crisis, but also, and to a larger extent, in foreign and security policy. Denmark remains very supportive of Germany's aspirations to take on more leadership and action within international affairs, and believes that Germany is also the right country to push forward the EU's common foreign policy system. This was, for example, seen in the recent review process of the European External Action Service (EEAS) where a group of countries, led by Germany and including Denmark, took on a maximalist approach to the strengthening of the EEAS in the future.

Moving out of the crisis

Generally, there exists a reticence in Denmark towards economic integration within the EU, not least exemplified by the Danish opt-out from the euro. For this reason there has been a fairly limited debate on the preferred reform options at the European level. When debating recent initiatives of furthering EU economic governance within the current limits of the Lisbon Treaty, e.g. the establishment of a banking union or the creation of euro-bonds, the debate in Denmark has been hesitant, and a clear national position has not yet been formed.

At the same time, Denmark greatly acknowledges the crucial need for common solutions and European leadership so that the EU and Denmark can move out of the crisis. Since the beginning of the crisis, the Danish perception has been that the austerity measures taken by the EU were necessary. Even when the current centre-left government came into office in 2011, replacing the former right-wing government, this viewpoint was maintained. However, the focus is now shifting towards the perceived necessity of spurring growth in Europe in order to get out of the crisis. Thus, while the austerity measures towards certain member states have been largely supported, there is an increasing focus on the fact that there now is a need to limit austerity and concentrate more on developing practical policies to promote growth, jobs and investment.

The consequences of a British exit

The possibility of a British exit from the EU has raised a considerable amount of debate in Denmark. The UK is perceived as a close ally and an important trade partner, so maintaining close ties with Britain is a top priority for Denmark. Moreover, Denmark and the UK share a similar relationship with the EU, as semi-attached members insisting on staying out of certain aspects of EU cooperation. Both countries joined the EU in 1973 and for similar reasons of mainly pursuing economic interests.

A possible British exit would, without doubt, spur a serious public debate on the Danish EU relationship. When Prime Minister David Cameron first announced the possibility for the UK to either leave the EU or renegotiate its EU membership terms, opinion polls were undertaken in Denmark, where half of the population wanted to follow the British example.

However, the current government and a large majority of the Danish political parties are pro-European and have rejected a potential renegotiation of Danish EU membership. In fact, the policy line of the government is that Denmark should rather aim to be as close to the core of the EU as possible, implying a strong wish to get rid of the existing Danish opt-outs. At the same time, there is widespread scepticism towards parts of EU cooperation in the Danish public, which makes it difficult for any government to follow through with its ambition of getting closer to the EU's core.

Links:

- European Parliament News, [Danish PM: Austerity and growth are two sides of the same coin](#), 19 January 2012.
- Euractiv, [Denmark won't follow Britain's EU direction, minister says](#), 7 May 2013.
- Various Ministries of Foreign Affairs, [Strengthening the European External Action Service](#), 1 February 2013.