

Global Politics – Engagement Activity

How does civil society, compared to national policies, impact the integration of refugees and immigrants in Denmark?

Word count: 1997

Introduction

In Denmark, since 2015 where refugees walked the Danish highways,¹ several national policies that claimed to promote integration were passed, while civil society initiatives started to develop. This was clearly expressed in my hometown: the opening of a refugee centre first caused local disapproval, but also led to locals starting a Cross Culture Choir, the NGO Danish Refugee Council becoming increasingly engaged and independent initiatives opening. Thus, I became interested in better understanding the dynamics in my hometown and the role of civil society in the integration in Denmark. Hence, through my engagement activity of working in a youth centre for young refugee and immigrant girls, I aim to evaluate the strategies used by the Danish government and organizations of civil society through the question, *How does civil society, compared to national policies, impact the integration of refugees and immigrants in Denmark?*

My engagement activity is closely linked to the matter of governance, as the approaches taken by the party in power and civil society are distinct in their motives and address the issue very differently. Furthermore, my engagement and research has shown that poor integration strategies may lead to certain rights being denied for immigrants, which further raises questions of human rights and social in/exclusion. While the distinction behind the motives of refugees compared to immigrants in entering Denmark is an important one,² effective integration of all foreign inhabitants is essential regardless of legal status. Hence, this report will look at different actors' general strategies towards integration rather than initiatives aimed at a specific group.

¹ Natali Braagaard, "Se de historiske billeder: Flygtninge på danske landeveje og stationer – på vej til Sverige," *TV2*, published September 9, 2015, accessed February 1, 2017, <http://nyheder.tv2.dk/2015-09-09-se-de-historiske-billeder-flygtningene-paa-danske-landeveje-og-stationer-paa-vej-til>.

² While refugees flee their countries for minimal safety and "international protection," immigrants decide to leave their homeland with prospects for a better life in another country. ("Refugees' and 'Migrants' – Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)," *UNHCR*, published March 16, 2016, accessed February 1, 2017, <http://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2016/3/56e95c676/refugees-migrants-frequently-asked-questions-faqs.html>).

Explanation of the engagement activity

For my engagement activity, I volunteered at a youth centre called Club13, founded in April 2016, in my hometown Haslev, Denmark. The women working at the youth centre aim to promote the integration of girls, who have come to Denmark as refugees or immigrants, by providing a space where they can form social relations while improving their Danish and their understanding of Danish culture and society.

In Club13, we organized games, helped the girls with their homework, read aloud Scandinavian literature, celebrated birthdays, watched Danish youth movies and went to an event at a local gallery, where we participated in a Danish mid-summer tradition. Club13 operates with strong ties to the non-governmental organization, Danish Refugee Council, but only with minimal financial support from the municipality, yet the young women still have a positive impact, as the girls expressed themselves when I met them. This helped me understand how NGOs such as Danish Refugee Council as well as ordinary people forming other initiatives such as Club13 are essential in making people from different social groups interact and strengthen social cohesion in local communities. Thus, I was able to make an important distinction between how national policies may impact integration at a national level, while civil society has a greater impact on social inclusion at a local level. Additionally, it became clear to me how human rights are not abstract constructs solely; I saw how national policies claiming to promote integration might instead have serious consequences if compromising with human rights.

Analysis of political issue

When the Danish then one-party government consisting of the centre-right party, Venstre, passed the so-called “asylum agreement” in July 2015, the main goals were clearly stated in a press release; it should ensure that “it will become less attractive to come to Denmark and more attractive to work and contribute to the Danish society.”³ The agreement, which is applied to anybody, who has been without permanent residence in Denmark for the past seven out of eight years, introduced the so-called “integration benefit” and “language bonus.” The former resulted in a 45 per cent cut in the amount of money people are granted if unemployed, while the latter meant that by having passed an intermediate Danish language exam, 1500 DKK,⁴ equivalent to 220 USD, could be added to the monthly integration benefit of people “who actively attempt to become part of the Danish society,” as put by the Venstre-government.⁵ Both were meant to motivate refugees and immigrants to integrate in society and pursue a career in Denmark. Moreover, the government passed a policy restricting family reunification by making it more difficult for foreigners with temporary status to get their spouse or children to Denmark,⁶ based on the assumption that a smaller number of foreigners would lead to more successful integration and be less of a financial burden to the state.

However, looking into the ideology and motivations of the party, Venstre, it seems the policies were implemented for the party to maintain its popularity and keep political collaboration opportunities rather than to promote integration. As a one-party government, Venstre has been strongly dependent on the right-winged party, Danish People’s Party, which got 21.1 per cent of the votes in

³ “Straksindgreb på asylområdet – ny integrationsydelse til nyankomne udlændinge,” *Beskæftigelsesministeriet*, published July 1, 2015, accessed February 1, 2017, my translation,

<http://bm.dk/da/Aktuelt/Pressemeddelelser/Arkiv/2015/07/Straksindgreb%20paa%20asylomraadet%20-%20ny%20integrationsydelse%20til%20nytilkomne%20udlaendinge.aspx#>.

⁴ “Denmark to reduce asylum benefits,” *The Local*, published July 1, 2015, accessed February 1, 2017, <http://www.thelocal.dk/20150701/denmark-government-to-reduce-asylum-seeker-benefits>.

⁵ “Straksindgreb på asylområdet – ny integrationsydelse til nyankomne udlændinge.”

⁶ Michael Ørts Christiansen and Mads Korsager Nielsen, “Regeringen vil stramme reglerne for familiesammenføring,” *Danmarks Radio*, published May 31, 2016, accessed February 1, 2017, <https://www.dr.dk/nyheder/politik/regeringen-vil-stramme-reglerne-familiesammenfoering>.

the election in June 2015, in order to win a majority when passing its laws in the field of integration.⁷ Thus, Venstre's "asylum agreement" appears as an attempt for the party to bridge its own economically liberal and market-oriented profile with the more value-based, conservative and immigration-critical ideology of Danish People's Party, rather than a genuine agreement reached in order to improve integration, which Venstre claimed officially to maintain a positive public opinion.

Nevertheless, the infamous laws that were passed do have real consequences and clearly demonstrate the party and its coalition's realist perspective on the matter of integration; if foreigners come to Denmark, it is not the responsibility of the state to ensure or promote their integration. The current government's main strategies have thus been rooted in economic power, mainly seen in the use of financial incentives. Moreover, Venstre's main rationale to promote integration was largely based on the national interests of Denmark and its prospects for economic gain through foreign workforce, because, as stated in a report from the Ministry of Foreigners, Integration and Housing, "We must help the refugees in order to help ourselves."⁸ This was further demonstrated by the agreement reached between the government, the employers and the workers in March 2016, which resulted in the initiative "Together for Integration." This mainly aimed at facilitating employment of refugees in Danish workplaces,⁹ by giving financial benefits to companies that would employ them, de-bureaucratising the legal process of integration on the labour market,¹⁰ and making language education focussed on prospective jobs.¹¹ The national policies thus focussed on integration merely in the professional sphere and for economic gain.

⁷ Per Bang Thomsen, "Historisk DF-valg sikrer blå blok sejren," *Danmarks Radio*, published June 18, 2015, accessed February 1, 2017, <http://www.dr.dk/nyheder/politik/valg2015/historisk-df-valg-sikrer-blaa-blok-sejren>.

⁸ "Forstå tankerne bag regeringens beskæftigelsesrettede integrationsindsats," *Udlændinge-, Integrations- og Boligministeriet*, published August 24, 2016, accessed February 1, 2017, my translation, <https://www.regeringen.dk/aktuelle-dagsordener/flygtningekrisen/med-gode-kollegaer-foelger-god-integration/>.

⁹ "Om initiativet," *Sammen om Integrationen*, published December 23, 2016, accessed February 1, 2017, <http://sammenomintegration.dk/om-initiativet>.

¹⁰ Theis Lange Olsen, "Regeringen indgår trepartsaftale om bedre integration af flygtninge," *Danmarks Radio*, published March 17, 2016, accessed February 1, 2017, <https://www.dr.dk/nyheder/politik/regeringen-indgaar-trepartsaftale-om-bedre-integration-af-flygtninge>.

¹¹ Johan Blem Larsen, "OVERBLIK: Her er de 21 punkter i første delaftale om integration," published February 26, 2016, accessed February 1, 2017, <https://www.dr.dk/nyheder/politik/overblik-her-er-de-21-punkter-i-foerste-delaftale-om-integration>.

Consequently, internationally recognized bodies and NGOs have argued that the aforementioned national policies may inhibit rather than promote integration, because of their limited focus. The UNHCR, for example, deemed the asylum agreement a violation of the UN refugee convention from 1951 and said it would lead to worse integration and have “a discriminating effect.”¹² Several opposition parties in parliament and humanitarian organizations such as Red Cross have also warned that the integration benefit may lead to social exclusion and relative poverty, and that refugees and immigrants are likely to be forced to move to cheaper areas, which may create social and geographical fragmentation.¹³ Moreover, harsh financial situations may lead to marginalization and, as experts have argued, radicalization,¹⁴ and thereby inhibit integration, as Danish Refugee Council has proposed.¹⁵ I understood the real consequences of these policies during my engagement in Club13, when the mother of a girl from Syria came to pick up her daughter. Together with the other volunteers, we had a brief conversation where she expressed her gratitude that the events in Club13 are for free; she herself was unsure about her job situation and in potential risk of being subject to the laws passed by the Venstre-government. She was relieved that her daughter had a safe social space that would ensure her integration into social life and Danish culture at a young age.

As such, civil society organizations such as Club13 represent employ an entirely different set of values and strategies than the Venstre-government. Instead of focussing on integrating refugees and immigrants as professionals, Club13 works on providing the very basis for a life in Danish society to girls from an early age. Along with many other organizations, Club13 holds the constructivist perspective that understanding, collaboration and collective identity are desirable in itself, proposing that a central aim of integration should be to “break the barriers, and erase the cultural differences in

¹² “Flygtningehøjkommissariat: Integrationsydelsen er diskriminerende,” *UNRIC*, published August 11, 2015, accessed February 1, 2017, my translation, <http://www.unric.org/da/nyhedsarkiv/27382--flygtningehojkommissariat-integrationsydelsen-er-diskriminerende>.

¹³ “Integrationsydelsen skader integrationen og rammer børnene,” *Enhedslisten*, published August 17, 2015, accessed February 1, 2017, <https://enhedslisten.dk/2015/08/17/integrationsydelsen-skader-integrationen-og-rammer-boernene>.

¹⁴ Morten Skærbæk, “Ekspert: Støjbergs integrationsydelse kan øge radikaliserings,” *Politiken*, published August 18, 2015, accessed February 1, 2017, <http://politiken.dk/indland/politik/article5585876.ece>.

¹⁵ Emilie Kleding Rasmussen, “Socialrådgivere om integrationsydelse: Det spænder ben for integrationen,” *Politiken*, published August 13, 2015, accessed February 1, 2017, <http://politiken.dk/indland/politik/article5585365.ece>.

an interesting and intriguing way.”¹⁶ In Club13, this is practically done through social activities focussed on interaction, communication and awareness of others with no expectation of a future economic gain for either part. I experienced the importance of this through my engagement, where we celebrated a Danish mid-summer tradition with the local community and many local children started playing with the girls from Club13. I saw how civil society is important in filling out the gap between the national policies and individual citizens by providing a space for interaction and understanding in a local setting. This has become more necessary as traditional systems of governance have been altered to encompass and depend upon actors at various levels in a system of “multi-level governance.”¹⁷ In today’s world successful integration is only achievable through different strategies by actors at various levels; whereas the national policies are aimed at integration in the professional sphere, civil society provides another dimension focussed on social and civil life.

Nevertheless, one could argue that, as civil society consists in local institutions or organizations acting in the interests of civilians, the main rationale behind their initiatives may be their own desire to generate a feeling of control in the local context, as well as to appear genuine and altruistic. Hence, there is the risk that independent initiatives of civil society are not implemented with enough care and professional expertise; anybody can start an initiative like Club13. I became suspicious of this during my engagement, as I discovered that the founders of Club13 had no previous experience with integration, which I perceived as hugely problematic in dealing with such a delicate issue. However, several of the volunteers had immigrated and gone through integration processes in Denmark themselves. I noticed that they often used this as a way of building trust and confidentiality with the children, which I perceived as another useful feature of civil society in the processes of integration; Club13 employs a strategy focussed on individuals and interpersonal understanding rather than reaching quantitative goals like the ones put forward by the government.

¹⁶ Charlotte Thayson, “Unge piger integreres i Klub 13,” *Haslev Posten*, published May 3, 2016, accessed February 1, 2017, pg. 20, my translation, <http://www.e-pages.dk/haslevposten/22/>.

¹⁷ Andrew Heywood, *Global Politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 131.

However, Red Cross has argued that particularly refugees, because of traumatic experiences in their home countries, “find it difficult to mobilize the extra energy that is needed in learning a new language or being integrated,”¹⁸ which may appear as an obstacle to successful integration for this particular group. Nevertheless, as I experienced in Club13, promoting the self-development of refugees and immigrants in order for them to gain the necessary confidence to pursue a career in Denmark appears as a more sustainable solution than excluding people based on an apparent lack of personal initiative. I talked to several girls, who felt they had improved in all their school subjects merely because Club13 had supported them in improving their Danish. According to an Oxford Research investigation from 2016 about the integration initiatives organized by Red Cross Denmark, 77% of the refugees involved in the organization’s activities said that they “to a large extent can take care of themselves better in Denmark,” while they improved their Danish, gained more confidence and felt more inclined to start an education or apply for a job in Denmark.¹⁹ Hence, social initiatives may not only promote understanding and improve interaction, but also have long-term economic benefits in the national interest of the state, despite not being the main aim. Thus, whether immigration strategies can be deemed effective strongly depends on how “success” is understood, as the mere purpose of actors varies greatly. However, civil society initiatives principally aimed at creating collective understanding and interaction may have economic benefits long term, and thereby comprehensively address the issue without causing harsh financial situation or conflicting with human rights, like some of the national policies in Denmark.

¹⁸ “Stramninger skader god integration,” *Røde Kors*, accessed February 1, 2017, my translation, <https://www.rodekors.dk/nyheder/stramninger-skader-god-integration>.

¹⁹ Stine Oksbjerg, “Frivillige har stor betydning for integrationen af flygtninge,” *Røde Kors*, published February 26, 2016, accessed February 1, 2017, my translation, <http://mitrodekors.dk/nyheder/frivillige-har-stor-betydning-integration-af-flygtninge>.

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