

Denmark Leads Nationalist Challenge to Europe's Open Borders

By [SUZANNE DALEY](#)

COPENHAGEN — Ten years ago, as [Denmark](#) joined the [European Union](#)'s visa-free open travel zone, the outraged Danish People's Party bought a decommissioned border guardhouse, vowing that one day it would be in use again.

Back then, most Danes dismissed the move as a colorful publicity stunt by the newly formed right-wing party.

But last month, the Danish People's Party was doing a victory dance, offering to donate its picturesque brick guardhouse at the German border to the government. The party had achieved its goal: Prime Minister Lars Lokke Rasmussen had [agreed to restore 24-hour customs control](#) in exchange for support on a difficult budget package.

The deal set off an outcry in the European Union as tiny Denmark became the first member to seriously challenge the union's crowning achievement: the free movement of goods and services across borders.

Italy and France, wrangling over a huge influx of immigrants from North Africa, have been pushing for a lesser step — the ability to temporarily close borders in an emergency. This got the official nod of approval during a meeting of European leaders on Friday.

What will happen in Denmark remains less clear. The Danish Parliament has yet to ratify its border deal, and the union has issued a stern warning, saying Denmark's plans are probably incompatible with its "obligations under European and international law."

But experts say the situation in Denmark, where support for the far right has risen steadily over the past decade, is part of a worrying trend for the European Union. Small nationalist parties in many European countries, determinedly anti-immigrant and anti-European Union, are leveraging important changes in policies.

"It is something that we are seeing across the European Union," said Fredrik Erixon, the director of the [European Center for International Political Economy](#) in Brussels.

Mr. Erixon and other experts say these populist parties have succeeded in producing a serious assault on the European Union's principal institutions: the euro zone and free trade across open borders.

In Italy, for instance, legislation was passed recently to designate certain Italian companies as strategic and prevent their foreign takeover.

In Finland, the [populist True Finn Party](#) won 19 percent of the vote in April when it campaigned on the promise to oppose any further contributions to bailing out euro zone countries.

In the Netherlands, the far-right Freedom Party is credited with pulling that country away from its historically pro-Europe stance. In recent months, as euro zone officials have fought to steady markets in the face of a possible default by Greece, a Dutch government that relies on the openly anti-European Union party has fiercely opposed expanded powers for the union's bailout fund.

"For decades, the E.U. had been moving ever closer to an overarching cooperation," Mr. Erixon said. "But what we are seeing now is a reversal in the overall trend. Some of the E.U.'s crown jewels are under attack."

In Denmark, political analysts say the Danish People's Party has not only drawn more and more voters since it was founded in 1998, getting 13 percent of the vote in 2007, but it has also pulled more mainstream parties to the right as they try to win those voters back, a phenomenon that experts say has occurred in many other countries.

Prof. Marlene Wind, a political scientist at the University of Copenhagen, said that with new elections likely in the next few months, only one small party, the Social Liberal Party, initially spoke out against the border deal. "Hardly anyone said anything because they think it might get them voters back from the D.P.P.," Professor Wind said.

Much of the support for the far right in Denmark comes from the working class, which chafed the most at ultraliberal [immigration](#) policies that allowed thousands of immigrants — from Iran, Iraq and the Balkans — to enter the country in the 1970s, '80 and '90s.

Denmark had few policies in place to deal with the immigrants' needs, experts say. Blue-collar Danes resented that many newcomers in their neighborhoods never learned Danish and remained unemployed, clustered in the suburbs of Copenhagen.

While mainstream parties avoided the subject as politically incorrect, the Danish People's Party, led by Pia Kjaersgaard, a home care attendant for the elderly before she entered politics, took it on. Ms. Kjaersgaard is widely credited with forcing an overhaul of the country's immigration policies, now among the most restrictive in Europe.

Many of her supporters are like Rene Schultz, a 42-year-old furniture mover from Ishoj who is wistful for simpler times and blames immigrants for a rise in crime, though official statistics do not support this claim.

"We need to close the borders," Mr. Schultz said. "And if they throw us out of the European Union, that's fine with me. There was a robbery here just last week. The old people are afraid to go out."

Martin Henriksen, the party's spokesman for social issues, said that for a country to survive, its people must share values and customs. He predicted that Sweden would fall apart because so many immigrants were living there. And he called the European Union's objections to the border

deal absurd. “If we throw someone out of the country because he is a criminal, he can turn around and walk back in,” Mr. Henriksen said. “That is ridiculous.”

Just how much more Europe’s nationalist parties can grow is an open question. The Danish People’s Party alienated many of its supporters when it signed on to the budget deal, which called for an overhaul of the pension system in order to save costs.

For the moment, the Danish government continues to say that it will move forward with its agreement to have a 24-hour presence at its borders. Currently, drivers from Germany and Sweden can pass into Denmark without taking their feet off the accelerator, except for the occasional toll.

But all that may change. Under the plan, Denmark would add about 100 customs officials, install or restore guardhouses, set up video cameras and construct special lanes where cars can be detained. Boom gates and stop signs have already been purchased.

These moves, officials insist, are not in violation of the European Union’s open border policy, the so-called [Schengen agreement](#). For a while, Denmark’s tax minister, Peter Christensen, insisted that six other countries in the bloc had already done what the government was proposing. But by the end of last week, that claim had been disproved.

The mistake was just the latest embarrassment for the Liberal-Conservative government, which has faced protests from Swedish and German officials — and a spate of biting comedy show material. For some Danes, the low point was watching [a recent skit](#) on a Jon Stewart-style show in Germany.

It featured a newsman at the German border with Denmark, a newly installed boom gate blocking the road. In the background, a luckless German who had strayed into Danish territory was being gunned down.

“There we were being made fun of by the Germans,” said Professor Wind, who is appalled at the government’s willingness to bargain with the Danish People’s Party. “In Denmark, we don’t think of the Germans as even having a sense of humor, but this is completely on the spot and very funny. It’s so embarrassing.”