

1.07.2022

Denmark's Zeitenwende

Denmark has ended its opt-out from EU defence, showing it is still possible to win referendums on closer European integration. Yet it does not signal a broader shift in the country's EU policy.

Skrevet af

Lykke Friis

✉ lykke@thinkeuropa.dk

Iben Tybjærg Schacke-Barfoed

☎ +45 71 99 29 06

✉ iben@thinkeuropa.dk

“Historic events call for historic decisions.” With these words, Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen [called](#) on 6 March for a snap referendum on her country’s opt-out from EU defence. Russian President Vladimir Putin’s invasion of Ukraine was the obvious backdrop to this decision. Yet the *Zeitenwende* speech by German Chancellor Olaf Scholz one week earlier also spurred Frederiksen – and a majority of Danish MPs – to step up Denmark’s commitment to common European defence. They did so by promising to fulfil Denmark’s NATO commitment to spend 2 per cent of GDP on defence and by organising the referendum.

On 1 June 2022, a resounding 67 per cent of Danes voted to scrap the opt-out – a legacy of Denmark’s June 1992 referendum, in which a slim majority of voters rejected the Maastricht Treaty. Upon voting “no”, Denmark negotiated opt-outs on defence, the euro, justice and home affairs, and union citizenship. Danes then voted in favour of the opt-outs in a referendum on 18 May 1993.

The result of the most recent vote is indeed historic. Previous governments held referendums on the euro opt-out in 2000 and the justice and home affairs opt-out in 2015 – but, both times, Danes voted to maintain the status quo. Moreover, Frederiksen has also secured the widest “yes” margin in a referendum since 1972, when then-prime minister Jens Otto Krag carried Denmark into the European Communities.

The turnout in the recent referendum was the only cloud in the sky. Sixty-six per cent of the electorate participated in the vote – the second-lowest turnout in Denmark’s nine referendums on the European Union, and significantly lower than the 90 per cent who voted 50 years ago. Nonetheless, this level of participation is on a par with that in the last European Parliament election.

Sovereignty and a European army

The spectre of a European army has long haunted the Danish debate on EU defence. The ‘no’ camp hailed the opt-out as a legal bulwark against the formation of such an army and the eternal loss of Danish sovereignty. For instance, it invoked recent speeches by French President Emmanuel Macron and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen on the issue – but the approach did not gain traction this time around.

The fact that the much-dreaded European army had not materialised since Denmark’s ‘no’ vote in 1992 undermined the scaremongering. In addition, the ‘yes’

camp made sure to appeal to a generally Atlanticist electorate by emphasising that ending the opt-out would strengthen the European pillar of NATO and accommodate US demands that Europe step up its defence commitments in its neighbourhood. This tactic prevented the campaign from turning into a battle between “team EU” and “team NATO”.

Opinion polls have [consistently shown](#) Danes’ strong reluctance to transfer sovereignty to the EU. However, politicians in the ‘yes’ camp appear to have convinced the public that, as the EU’s defence initiatives are purely intergovernmental, the removal of the opt-out would not undermine Denmark’s sovereignty.

The fact that two-thirds of participants in the referendum voted ‘yes’ seems to reflect a recognition that Denmark needs more allies and friends in times of crisis. After Putin’s invasion, Denmark’s position as the only European NATO and EU member state outside the EU’s defence initiatives suddenly appeared odd and insecure. Just as Finland and Sweden pledged to join NATO, Denmark would join its EU partners on defence.

Push factors

A referendum was not in the cards at the turn of the year. Before becoming prime minister, Frederiksen – a social democrat – characterised Denmark’s opt-outs as the foundation of her EU policy. In fact, just a few weeks before Putin’s invasion, both she and Foreign Minister Jeppe Kofod argued vehemently that the defence opt-out in no way prevented Denmark from implementing its foreign and security policy. Frederiksen’s position on the issue aligned with public sentiment. Opinion polls had for many years shown public support for maintaining all four opt-outs. But public opinion [shifted](#) between February and March as concerned the defence opt-out. Seen from this perspective, there is no doubt that the Putin effect led to the referendum result on 1 June.

In addition, there was likely a degree of spillover from Danes’ growing support for EU membership – a trend that has been apparent since the Brexit vote and the election of Donald Trump in 2016. For instance, a poll conducted by European Council on Foreign Relations in April 2021 showed that 28 per cent of Danes thought EU membership was a “very good thing” – the highest proportion of any of the 12 national groupings in that study – while a slightly larger percentage believed it was just “a good thing”. This is in sharp contrast to public sentiment before the

referendum in 2015, a year in which the refugee crisis created a wave of scepticism of EU membership in Denmark.

Finally, one should not underestimate the political calculations in play. The liberals in opposition have long argued for the abolition of the Danish opt-out on defence. By calling for a referendum, Frederiksen – who is likely to face a parliamentary election this autumn – forced the opposition into a national alliance and pre-empted its potential accusations that she was failing to support Ukraine by any means necessary.

└ No Danish EU-phoria

The Danish government's next step will be to decide which EU defence initiatives to join. Judging by the referendum campaign, it seems likely that Denmark will participate in the EU's mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina. More importantly, the referendum result contributes to a major shift in Nordic security. Once Sweden and Finland join NATO, all four Nordic countries (Denmark, Sweden, Finland, and Norway) and the three Baltics states (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) will be able to jointly participate in both NATO and EU operations, and to engage in military planning and exercises accordingly. As former Swedish prime minister Carl Bildt has [argued](#), one needs to go back to the Middle Ages and the Kalmar Union to find similar opportunities for a united Scandinavia.

However, one should not exaggerate the impact of the Danish *Zeitenwende* beyond EU defence. While the referendum marks a sea change in Denmark's EU defence policy, it does not signal a broader shift in its EU policy. That much became clear on the night of the vote, when Frederiksen immediately promised the Danish electorate that she would “handle the ‘yes’ with great care” and take into consideration the concerns of the 33 per cent who had voted ‘no’. She also stressed that she would refrain from putting the other opt-outs to a vote.

Frederiksen's Eurosceptic credentials and strong support for a fiscally conservative grouping of member states (which also includes Sweden, the Netherlands, Austria, and – periodically – Finland) during the EU budget negotiations in 2020 might have contributed to the ‘yes’ vote. Danes sceptical of the EU could trust Frederiksen – who has been labelled the most Eurosceptic Danish prime minister in history – not to move against the remaining opt-outs. Frederiksen is also promoting initiatives that are at odds with EU priorities, such as through talks with Rwanda about a new

procedure for transferring asylum seekers to the east African nation. Such a procedure would run in opposition to the EU's asylum policy.

In this light, Frederiksen's referendum is reminiscent of Richard Nixon's 1972 visit to China. Just as no one feared that the staunchly anti-communist Nixon would appease China, no one expected Frederiksen to transform into a European federalist. Throughout the referendum campaign, she was careful to remind Danish voters (and her European colleagues) that Denmark was against the idea of a new European convention, let alone a new intergovernmental treaty.

Although the Danish *Zeitenwende* has many nuances, one should not dismiss its psychological effect. The Danish government's victory has demonstrated that it is still possible to win referendums on closer European integration. Nonetheless, it may be a long wait for Denmark's next referendum on the EU.