



After the Danish Early Elections: Frederiksen Seeks a Broad Coalition

Veronika Jóźwiak

The outcome of the general elections in Denmark on 1 November marks a continuation of existing policies that have led to landmark security and defence decisions in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Converging threat perceptions and the launch of the Baltic Pipe's receiving terminal in Nybro—crucial to Polish energy security—could be the basis for an expanded partnership between Poland and Denmark.

Post-Election Political Scene. The early elections were won by the so-called red bloc, a group of left-wing parties, which obtained a slight majority (90 seats) in the 179-member unicameral Folketing. Its largest party is the Social Democratic Party, which achieved its best result in more than 20 years (27.6%, about 2% more than in [previous elections](#)). The party's leader, Mette Frederiksen, Denmark's prime minister from 2019 at the head of a minority social democratic government, this time wants to form a cabinet of a broad centrist coalition, above the traditional division into "red" and "blue" blocs. She argues this on the grounds of the extraordinary security situation and economic problems that require decisions based on cross-party consensus.

The coalition talks may drag on, as Frederiksen is holding them with 11 parties out of the 12 elected to the Folketing; the exception is the new anti-immigrant Danish Democrats party, which has withdrawn from the negotiations. So far, the negotiations have concerned the healthcare reform promised by the prime minister before the elections and the economic situation, especially how to resolve the highest inflation rate in 40 years (10%). Although the parties are proposing divergent solutions, the centre-right Danish Liberal Party (13%, down 10% in support), the second-largest party in parliament and leader of the "blues" is not ruling out entering government. The centre-left Danish Social Liberal Party, in turn, is in favour of forming a coalition of parties that supported [a compromise on security policy](#) in March ("red" social democrats, social liberals, and the Social

Democratic People's Party together with the "blue" liberals and the Conservative People's Party). The new centrist party of former Prime Minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen of the Moderates also favours a broad coalition. However, if such broad negotiations fail, a "red" government is likely to be formed.

The early elections were prompted by a scandal over the slaughter of several million mink, ordered by the government in November 2020. The authorities took their decision on the basis of scientific evidence that indicated that a variant of the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus identified in Danish mink could cause a decrease in the effectiveness of COVID-19 vaccines. The scandal that erupted was not over the correctness of the decision (as the variant was eliminated), but because the government lacked a legal basis for such an order. After an independent commission found that the authorities had overstepped their authority, the minority government lost the support of the forces working with it in parliament.

Security First. After the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine began in February, the government took a number of measures in defence and security policy. On the basis of the March cross-party compromise, it increased the funding of the Danish armed forces by DKK 3.5 billion (around €470 million) annually in 2022-2023, and decided to raise defence spending to 2% of GDP by 2033 (from the current level of 1.44%, which means an increase in the defence budget by around €2.4 billion a year). Denmark also helped

to strengthen NATO's Eastern Flank: in March, the country sent 200 troops to Estonia and two F-16 fighter jets to Poland; in May, it sent another battalion of 800 troops to Latvia; and in September, it deployed an additional 160 troops and 14 Leopard 2A7 tanks to Estonia. This is an extraordinary commitment for Denmark as the last time it reinforced a foreign military mission was with tanks in 2003 in the Balkans.

Denmark's decision to join the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) was another breakthrough. The country has so far been the only Member State not participating in it. In a June referendum, 67% of voters voted to drop this opt-out. In previous votes to adopt the euro (in 2000) and to apply the provisions of the EU treaty in the area of freedom, security and justice (in 2015), Danes refused to deepen integration with the EU. Polls in February and March indicated that their attitude towards the CSDP had changed in the face of the Russian aggression against Ukraine. The prime minister argued for a "yes" vote not with pro-EU slogans but by pointing out that Denmark's involvement in the policy would strengthen the European pillar of NATO and enable stronger partnerships (for example, with the Nordic countries) on an intergovernmental basis.

Denmark has continuously supported the Ukrainian military with weapons and training of soldiers. To date, it has spent the most funds for these purposes among the Nordic countries (6.2% of the defence budget). It has sent to Ukraine, among others, a Harpoon launcher and anti-ship cruise missiles, M-113 armoured personnel carriers and mortar bombs of its own production. It has also committed, together with Germany and Norway, to purchase 16 new Slovak Zuzana-2 self-propelled howitzers to be delivered to Ukraine in 2023. In August, it organised a donor conference which raised €1.5 billion for arming Ukraine. In turn, Denmark has donated around €90 million for humanitarian purposes and the support of public spending, and offered to cover the costs of rebuilding Mykolaiv.

Energy. According to polls conducted before the election, foreign affairs and defence were lower on the rung for the Danish public than energy issues. The reason for this may be that the government crisis and the campaign coincided with Russia's suspension of gas supplies through Nord Stream 1, which also supplied Denmark via Germany, and the subsequent [explosions of both Nord Stream pipelines](#) in Denmark's (and Sweden's) exclusive economic zone. Concerns about the security of energy infrastructure also increased after Bornholm was cut off from electricity for several hours on 10 October (according to official communications, the reason was a fault) and the sighting of

unidentified drones near Danish gas fields in the North Sea a week earlier.

Denmark is determined to give up using Russian gas—there is consensus on this between the largest parties in parliament. The country's level of dependency is difficult to estimate, as it imports 75% of its needs via Germany from various suppliers (the remaining 25% is self-produced biogas). Denmark does not have an LNG terminal to receive liquefied natural gas and its largest indigenous fields, normally covering the majority of Danish demand, are out of service until the 2023/2024 heating season due to technical upgrades. These difficulties are to be mitigated by the launch of gas supplies from Norway via the Baltic Pipe gas pipeline on 1 November and, in the longer term (by 2030), an increase in biogas production from the current 25% to 75% of demand. Although gas consumption accounts for only 14% of gross energy consumption, about 400,000 households in Denmark, which has a population of six million, have gas heating, so the issue of access to gas and its price dominates public discourse.

Conclusions. Despite the mink slaughter scandal, the Social Democrats and prime minister Frederiksen retained power in Denmark's early elections, through which the "red bloc" gained a bare majority in parliament. As this may not guarantee the stability of a "red" government, the prime minister declared the intention to create a centrist, broad coalition cabinet. This, in turn, may result in prolonged talks on the formation of a new government. However, regardless of its shape, there is consensus among the major parties on the most important security issues.

Denmark's participation in the CSDP implies participation in EU defence initiatives, including in the domain of foreign affairs with defence implications. This complements its defence policy, based on NATO membership and partnership with the U.S. It also enhances the coherence of the Nordic and Baltic states, which will be able to jointly engage in EU and allied defence activities (once Finland and Sweden are admitted to NATO). However, it is not the beginning of a broader change in the Danish approach to the EU, as evidenced by Frederiksen's assurances of maintaining national sovereignty after joining CSDP.

A converging perception of the security situation in the Baltic Sea region, increased defence spending, outsized assistance to Ukraine, the desire to cut off Russian gas supplies, and the launch of gas transmission from Norway through the Danish energy system bring Denmark closer to Poland to an unprecedented degree. In particular, there is a common interest in protecting maritime critical infrastructure, which opens up a new area of potential cooperation within NATO and the EU.