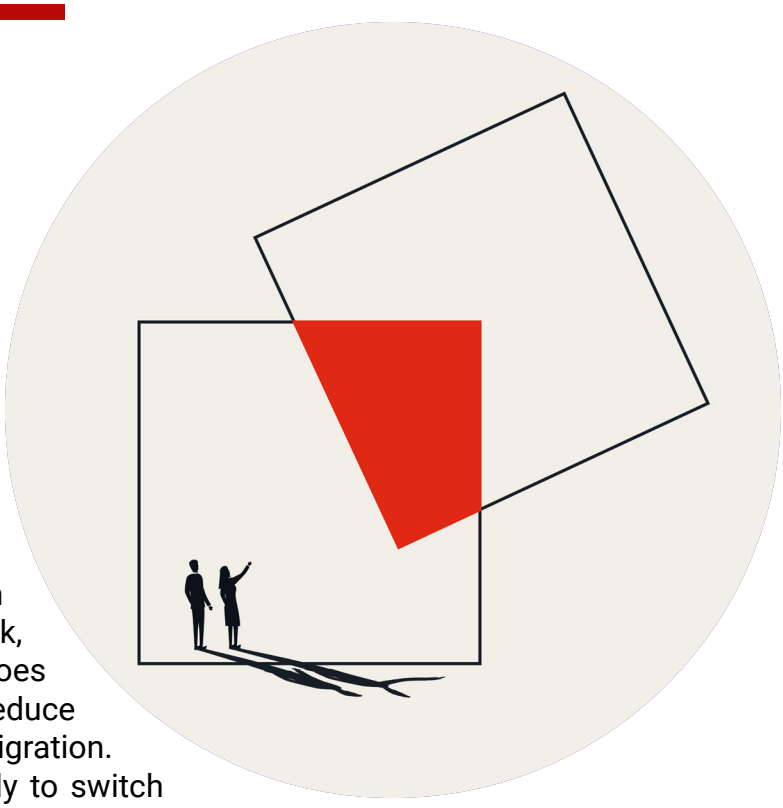
POLICY BRIEF
November 2026

FEPS
FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN
PROGRESSIVE STUDIES

REFRAME AND PIVOT!

PUTTING THE FAR RIGHT ON THE DEFENSIVE



ABSTRACT

As far-right parties become more influential across Europe, social democrats face a familiar challenge: should they confront, ignore or move closer to these parties? This policy brief examines political messaging and considers how social democrats should respond when the far right brings one of its core issues into public debate. Drawing on academic research and the case of Denmark, we suggest that using far-right arguments does not help social democrats win more votes, reduce support for the far right or lower illegal immigration. This is because few far-right voters are likely to switch sides to the left; most changes in voting happen in the centre and within the left and right blocks, so focusing too much on migration and law and order only highlights topics that benefit the far right. At the same time, ignoring the far right is not a viable option, since its popularity is now undeniable and its appeal reaches large electorates. Instead, this policy brief suggests a different approach: not ignoring the issues the far right puts forward but reframing and pivoting. This involves a sequence of recognising the real problems behind the far-right narrative, and, where necessary, correcting any false or discriminatory claims. After that, the argumentation should shift to strong policy proposals on issues where social democrats have credibility, with a clear message of equality and justice. Examples from healthcare, public safety and asylum administration show how this approach can work in practice.

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Introduction

As far-right parties gain ground across Europe, social democrats face a recurring dilemma: confront, ignore or move toward their positions? The far right's success is often attributed to their ownership of the immigration issue: the perception of being recognised and able to tackle immigration better than others. This ownership builds on its nativist and authoritarian core conviction: the belief that the nation should be culturally homogeneous and protected from outsiders, combined with the demand to strictly enforce this order and punish deviation.[1] When the far right wins over voters, social democrats face the challenge of how to react. In some countries, mainstream parties, including social democrats, have taken on far-right positions and language. As this policy brief will show, this usually harms them both electorally and strategically. Here, we look at how social democratic parties can adjust their political messaging in response to the far right popularising its core claims.[2] This policy brief does not discuss other important responses, like changes in party organisation, campaigning, coalition building, *cordon sanitaire* strategies or immigration policy design.

Generally, there are three ideal-type strategies that can be applied by mainstream parties, including social democratic ones, in response to issues raised by far-right parties:[3]

- **dismissive** (ignore the issue to lower its salience);
- **accommodative** (adopt the far-right position); and
- **adversarial** (take a strongly contrasting position).

What this policy brief shows is that, because the far right now has significant influence in public debate and in parliament, ignoring it is no longer an effective strategy. However, this does not mean social democrats should react to every provocation from the far right. Nor is accommodating far-right positions a promising strategy. Instead, social democrats should primarily focus on setting the agenda around their own progressive priorities, reframing debates when necessary and taking an adversarial stance where appropriate. The goal should not be to make fighting the far right the centre of their political strategy, but to build compelling political platforms rooted in progressive values that enjoy broad support in many countries. These platforms should be guided by a clear political narrative that communicates whose interests social democrats represent, whom they seek to include and what kind of society they want to build.

A strong sense of political purpose also enables social democrats to respond to the far right with confidence while remaining true to their core principles of solidarity and social justice. Conversely, when they become uncertain about their values and political programme, they risk adopting a reactive and defensive position, allowing the far right to set the terms of political debate. This makes it harder to challenge far-right narratives effectively and to offer voters a credible alternative. A weakened and hesitant centre-left therefore poses a broader risk to democracy: it leaves exclusionary and anti-democratic ideas less effectively challenged while weakening the political representation of those who seek progressive and democratic solutions.

In the following sections, we will briefly explain why there is little evidence to support accommodation strategies (Section 1) and how to reframe and shift away from the main narratives the far right is pushing into public debate (Section 2).

1. The risks and limits of accommodation

As the far right keeps adding voters in elections and enters governments, social democrats face an important question: how can they stop the far right from growing while keeping their own supporters? Is adopting far-right positions, especially on immigration and integration – key topics for the far right in much of Europe – part of the answer? Can this strategy weaken these parties or improve social democrats' election results? Put differently, if social democrats lean into far-right frames, what do they gain, what do they risk, and under what conditions is this approach more likely to succeed or fail?

The electoral evidence

Most comparative research suggests that accommodating far-right positions has generally failed to contain its electoral success or halt its rise. A 2023 study analysing 108 elections in 13 Western European countries between 1976 and 2017 found no evidence that mainstream parties reduce far-right support by adopting more restrictive immigration positions. If anything, such shifts led to more voters defecting to the far right.[4] A 2026 study further challenges the argument that accommodation might work when immigration is already highly salient among voters. Examining elections in which immigration was a major public concern, the authors found that mainstream parties did not benefit electorally from shifting towards more restrictive positions. Instead, parties that refrained from such shifts avoided substantial electoral losses to the far right in the cases examined.[5]

Research on social democratic electorates also challenges the assumption that their decline mainly reflects losses to the far right. At least in Western Europe, former social democratic voters have more often moved to green, left or centrist parties, while only a minority have shifted towards the far right.[6] This suggests two important conclusions: (1) a strategy focused only on recovering far-right voters can overlook larger losses elsewhere in the electorate; and (2) most voter movements occur within broader ideological blocs rather than directly between opposing political camps. For social democrats, in those cases, elections are mostly won through better mobilisation of the left camp or the centre, rather than hoping for vote switching between blocks.

The far right represents a fundamental challenge to democratic societies in many contexts, but social democrats should not assume that adopting far-right positions will allow them to win back far-right voters or reduce far-right support. The evidence suggests that such strategies often fail to achieve either objective.

The mainstreaming argument

Beyond electoral outcomes, copying far-right rhetoric contributes to the mainstreaming of its ideas and can lead to their normalisation and radicalising society even further. Mainstream parties and media help determine which issues receive attention and how those issues are understood.[7] Two mechanisms matter in this context.

First, political elites can shape public attitudes. A 2022 comparative study shows that exclusionary elite discourse is linked to more negative attitudes towards immigration, even after accounting for actual immigration levels.[8] Another 2025 study shows that anti-immigration statements by mainstream politicians can erode established norms of tolerance more strongly than similar statements by far-right politicians.[9] In summary: when mainstream parties present

far-right interpretations as reasonable or necessary, they weaken the stigma attached to those views.[10] Mainstream parties therefore have considerable influence over what is acceptable in political debate. By adopting far-right rhetoric, they do not merely respond to public concerns but risk legitimising exclusionary positions. This shifts the boundaries of acceptable discourse and makes it easier for far-right ideas to gain a foothold in mainstream politics. Over time, this can narrow the space for arguments based on human rights, dignity and equality – principles central to social democratic politics.[11]

Second, adopting far-right frames increases the political visibility of far-right issues. Public attention is a key resource in political competition: parties benefit when debates focus on issues they are perceived to own, especially when voters consider those issues important. By repeatedly placing immigration at the centre of political discourse, mainstream parties reinforce the far right's association with this issue and strengthen its claim to competence or credibility in this area – regardless of whether voters actually consider far-right solutions effective.[12]

Despite these two described mechanisms, mainstream parties often justify adopting more restrictive rhetoric as a necessary response to public concern. However, this argument deserves closer scrutiny. First, immigration is not consistently identified as the most important issue facing citizens across Europe. Moreover, survey responses often reflect broader perceptions of national challenges rather than the immediate concerns in their communities. When people are asked about issues affecting them personally, immigration tends to rank much lower than when they are asked about national priorities.[13] This distinction matters. Public concern about immigration is not only a reflection of direct experiences but is also shaped by political and media discourse. Hence, when mainstream parties repeatedly frame immigration as the central societal problem, they contribute to increasing the perceived importance of the issue. If parties then interpret this increased salience as evidence that even stronger immigration rhetoric is required, they create a self-reinforcing cycle that primarily benefits the far right.[14]

The result is both legitimation and erosion: adopting far-right frames risks strengthening the very political forces social democrats seek to contain, while simultaneously weakening their own issue ownership and political identity.

What the Danish case shows

The appeal of adopting far-right rhetoric and, in some cases, policy positions is usually justified by three assumptions: (1) that it will reduce support for the far right; (2) that it will attract voters from far-right parties; and (3) that stricter immigration policies will reduce immigration levels. Denmark provides an important case study because the Social Democratic Party, alongside most Danish mainstream parties, has pursued this approach for several years. The Danish experience raises questions about whether these assumptions hold in practice and illustrates the risks of normalising far-right frames and policy approaches.

In February 2019, the Social Democrats, together with other parties, including the far-right Danish People's Party, supported significant changes to immigration and integration legislation. The reform marked a shift away from a policy emphasis on long-term integration towards a greater focus on temporary protection, return and restrictions. It expanded the use of temporary protection statuses with limited prospects for permanent residence and included the so-called "Ghetto legislation" (officially, the "parallel society legislation"). The latter introduced measures targeting designated areas with a high share of "non-Western" residents, regardless of individual refugee or citizenship status, including the possibility of relocation under certain conditions to prevent the emergence of "parallel societies".[15]

The Social Democrats' sharper turn towards a restrictive approach on immigration, which began in 2015 and intensified after 2019, has not produced the expected electoral benefits. The main far-right party, Dansk Folkeparti (DF), experienced a dramatic decline in 2019, but Social Democrats gained only 10% of those former DF voters, most of whom did not hold strong immigration views. Research suggests that the party's electoral success in 2019 was instead linked more strongly to a leftwards shift on socio-economic issues than to its immigration position.[16] Moreover, DF's decline seemed largely driven by internal crises rather than by the Social Democrats' adoption of restrictive immigration rhetoric.[17] (see Figure 1 below).

While the overall vote share of far-right parties temporarily declined in 2019, support has remained relatively stable across the broader party family, with votes redistributed among several actors, including a later recovery of DF. Meanwhile, the Social Democrats' position has weakened since 2022. In the 2026 election, Epinion's voter-flow analysis shows them losing a third of their 2022 voters, with the largest single share going to Socialistisk Folkeparti (SF) – the Danish Green Left – while DF also made substantial gains.[18] This suggests that shifting right on issues such as immigration can cost a party support in both directions: progressive voters defect to the left, while the right-wing parties whose frames are being adopted still benefit. It also fits broader political science findings that parties lose support when they are perceived as moving away from core principles or traditional issue ownership.

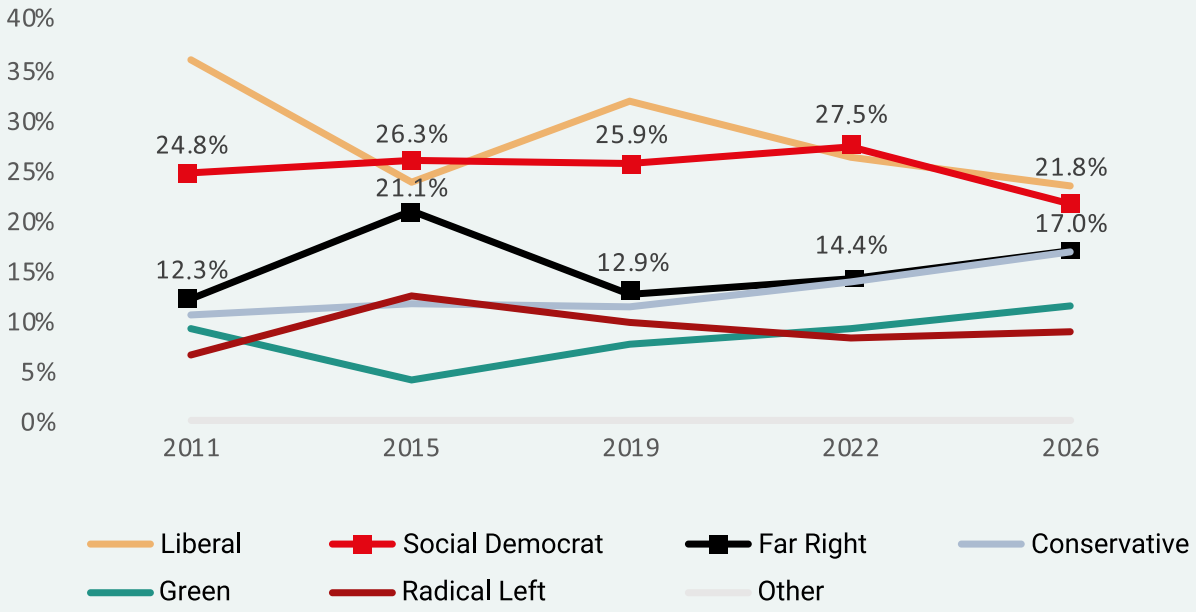
The third assumption – that restrictive immigration policies significantly reduce asylum applications – is also difficult to substantiate. In 2021, (Social Democratic) Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen expressed the ambition to reduce asylum applications to zero, reflecting the idea that deterrence-oriented policies would substantially decrease arrivals.[19] However, studies indicate that Denmark's immigration patterns are consistent with broader immigration research showing that deterrence measures have limited effects on asylum seekers' decisions about destination

countries.[20] Instead, factors such as existing social networks and community ties often play a more important role.[21]

In addition to deterring asylum seekers from moving to Denmark, there is also a focus on having them leave the country after their arrival. Yet the withdrawal of protection status does not necessarily result in actual repatriation, and some individuals may instead fall outside administrative oversight.[22] A regularised return is often complex, depending on bilateral agreements with countries of origin or, from a human rights and legal perspective, very questionable agreements with third countries. This creates a challenge from both humanitarian and state capacity perspectives: a government seeking to demonstrate control may face difficulties in ensuring that it knows the status and whereabouts of people within its territory.

The Danish case therefore challenges the three main arguments for copying the far right. Restrictive immigration rhetoric has not clearly weakened far-right electoral competition. Social Democrats have gained only limited support from former far-right voters, while losing support elsewhere, and there is limited evidence that stricter immigration policies alone produce substantial reductions in immigration. The broader lesson is that adopting far-right frames carries political risks while not necessarily delivering the promised electoral or policy outcomes.

Figure 1. Denmark parliamentary election vote share by ideology



Source: Folketinget | Danish Parliament. Own calculations.

2. Responding without adopting far-right frames

If adopting far-right rhetoric is unlikely to help win elections and may instead make nativist and authoritarian ideas more common, the question is what should be done instead. Rejecting far-right frames does not require dismissing concerns about immigration, security and public services. Social Democrats should recognise an overcrowded classroom, a delayed asylum decision or an unsafe public space as a problem requiring action. They should distinguish the concrete concern from an explanation that blames people collectively because of their origin. Where a claim is false or discriminatory, it needs to be corrected clearly, then the policy response needs to be explained in the party's own terms.

To do that, social democrats should assess their issue ownership: which problems voters associate with them and where they are seen as credible. In many countries, their strengths concern addressing socio-economic inequality and a welfare state that works for the many. This can provide a basis for responses centred on affordable housing, decent wages, healthcare, schools and economic security. The relevant starting point for this must be established in the national and local contexts.

Where that credibility has weakened, communication alone cannot rebuild it. Parties need a clear account of the future they seek, a realistic route to achieving it, and policies they can defend and deliver. This wider task exceeds the scope of this policy brief but is a prerequisite for the approach outlined below.

Reframe and then pivot

Reframing and pivoting help social democrats to respond when an opponent has set the terms of a debate. Neither is new to progressives but used systematically, both help them hold their ground against the far right. Reframing changes how a problem and its causes are understood; pivoting means focusing attention on a related policy priority where the party can offer a credible solution. Both require substantive policies, credible representatives, and a governing record or a realistic delivery plan. They are not tools for avoiding difficult questions.

The first step is deciding whether a response is necessary. A minor symbolic provocation may not deserve amplification. However, slow and error-prone asylum procedures, unsafe public spaces, or overburdened schools require a substantive response.

Reframing does not mean ignoring the topic. It means addressing the underlying concern with the party's own values and explanation of the problem. It should establish:

- what the **actual** problem is
- why **social democrats** think the problem exists
- what factors in their view contribute to it
- what needs be done to address it.

The response must then make the proposed action tangible: which services need to be improved, what changes are required and who is responsible for delivering them. Calls for "investment", "integration" or "enforceable rules" become meaningful when they identify concrete measures and explain how these would improve people's lives.

Once the concern has been addressed, the pivot connects these measures to a broader social democratic priority, such as accessible healthcare, safe communities or effective public administration.

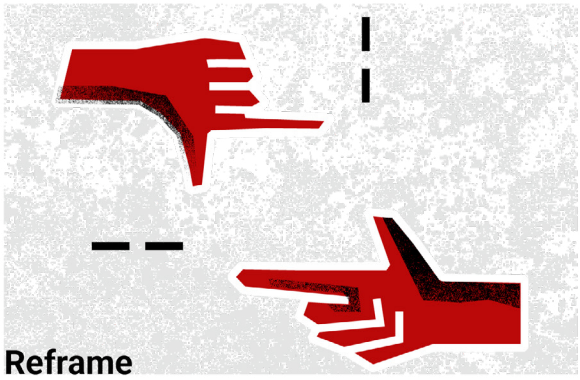
A practical sequence for responding:

1. Acknowledge the underlying concern, correcting false claims where necessary.
2. Reframe the causes and make the positive case for fairness, equal rights and effective administration.
3. Pivot to a connected improvement backed by a credible policy and delivery plan.
4. Repeat the core message consistently and show evidence of progress.

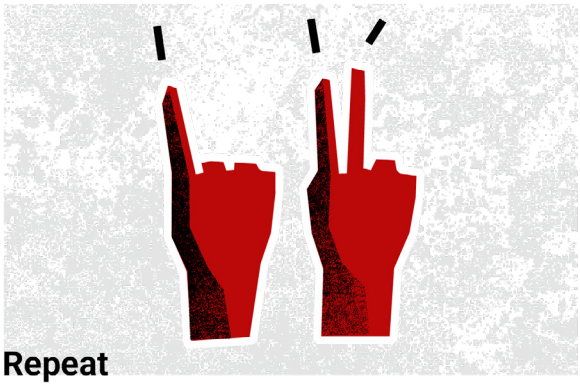
This sequence should guide preparation, not produce a mechanical script. Make sure that each answer responds to a concern, offers a realistic solution and is clear on first being heard. Do not routinely repeat an inflammatory accusation to deny it, but focus on your explanation of the underlying problem. For instance, present access to decent work as a route to independence and participation, alongside its contribution to public finances, rather than as the sole justification for people's rights.

The examples given below show how this sequence can translate into a practical response to voters.









Example 1: Access to healthcare

Far-right narrative: Immigrants are responsible for pressure on the welfare state.

Voter statement: "I cannot get a doctor's appointment, but immigrants seem to get help straight away."

Possible response:

Acknowledge: "You should be able to see a doctor when you need one."

Reframe: "The real problem of why many people have to wait so long for an appointment is that there aren't enough doctors and nurses. Too few are being trained, and too many are leaving. Without doctors and nurses who came here from abroad, waiting times would be even longer."

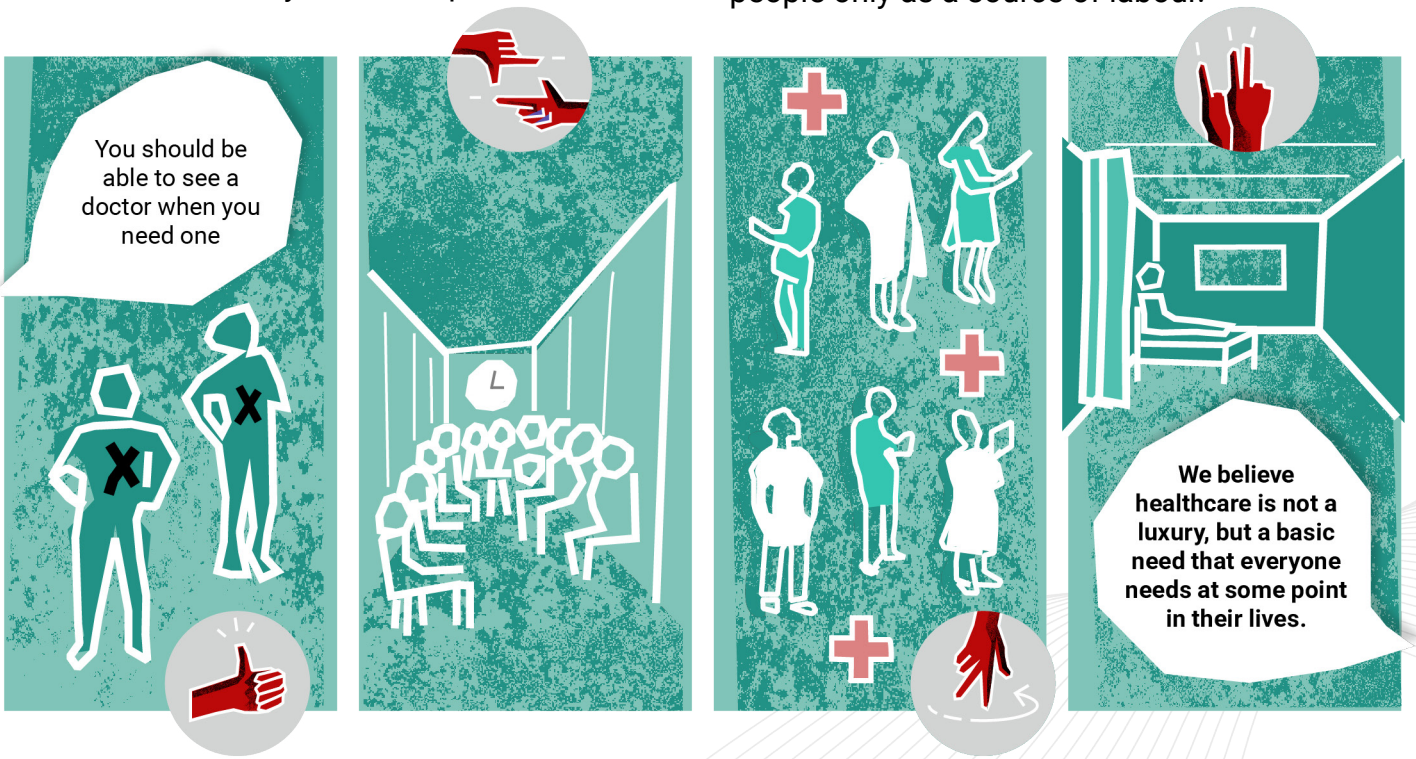
Pivot: "That's why we advocate for expanding the number of state-funded general practitioners and retaining nurses in local service, with funding that reflects local demand. So, we want more trained doctors, a system that provides nurses the pay and conditions to stay, and funding to be targeted where waiting lists are longest. We also want to help people with the right to work into proper jobs, through language courses and faster recognition of their qualifications, so they can contribute through taxes and social insurance obligations."

Core message: "We believe healthcare is not a luxury, but a basic need that everyone needs at some point in their lives."

Where the party governs, add one concrete result, such as a new practice opened or shorter local waiting times.

Building blocks: healthcare staffing and appointments; funding based on need; language and employment services; enforcement of employers' wage, tax and social insurance obligations.

Avoid: Repeating a sweeping accusation ("immigrants pressure the welfare state") before denying it, promising instant access or treating people only as a source of labour.



Example 2: Safety and accountability

Far-right narrative: Criminality is a defining characteristic of immigrants.

Voter statement: "After that assault near the station, I am afraid to walk home. Why is nobody doing anything, particularly about immigrants hanging out around the station at night?"

Possible response:

Acknowledge: "You should feel safe walking home, and you're right to expect action. That assault must be properly investigated, and whoever did it must be held to account by the law. Yet, collective blame does not help us make our streets any safer or provide sustainable protection."

Reframe: "Places like the station become unsafe when police are rarely seen, the area is badly lit and the social services that could prevent problems are stretched too thin."

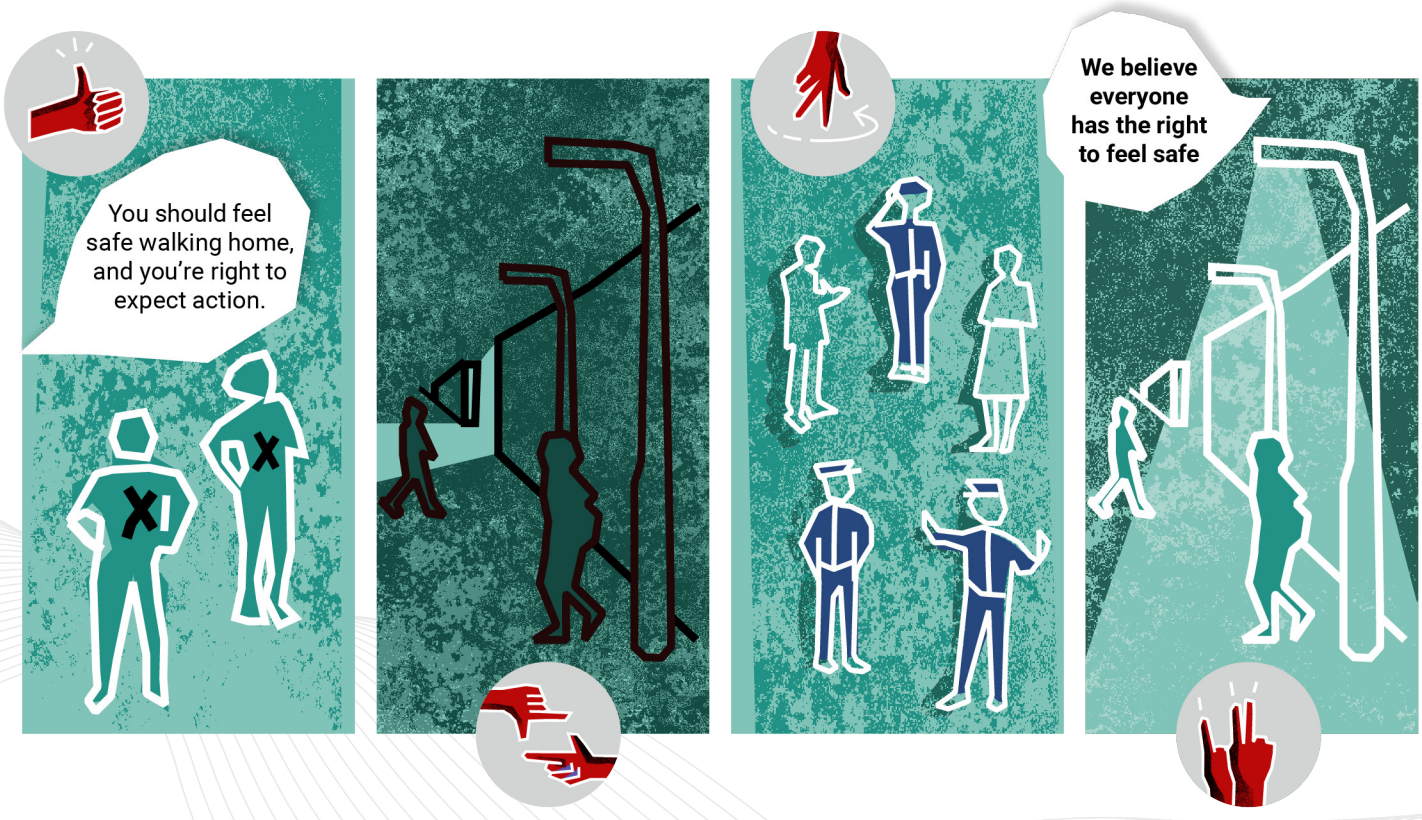
Pivot: "That's why we want visible local police patrols, better lighting around the station and proper support for victims. Where the same problems keep coming back, we want the police, the city officials and social services to tackle them together."

Core message: "We believe everyone has the right to feel safe in their neighbourhood, and anyone who commits a crime must face the same law."

Where the party governs, add one concrete result, such as regular patrols or new lighting around the station.

Building blocks: investigation; policing; safer public spaces; prevention; victim support.

Avoid: Dismissing a reported incident or using it to generalise about an entire group.



Example 3: Effective asylum administration

Far-right narrative: The state has lost control of immigration, and only a much stricter immigration system and harsher treatment of migrants can restore it.

Voter statement: "Why do asylum decisions take so long, and why is my city left to deal with the consequences?"

Possible response:

Acknowledge: "You're right that decisions take too long, and cities shouldn't be left to cope on their own. While long waits are bad for everyone, including the people waiting for an answer, we also need to take the time to get decisions right."

Reframe: "The real problem is a system that isn't equipped to do its job: too few trained caseworkers, appeals stuck in backlogs, and an underfunded judiciary.

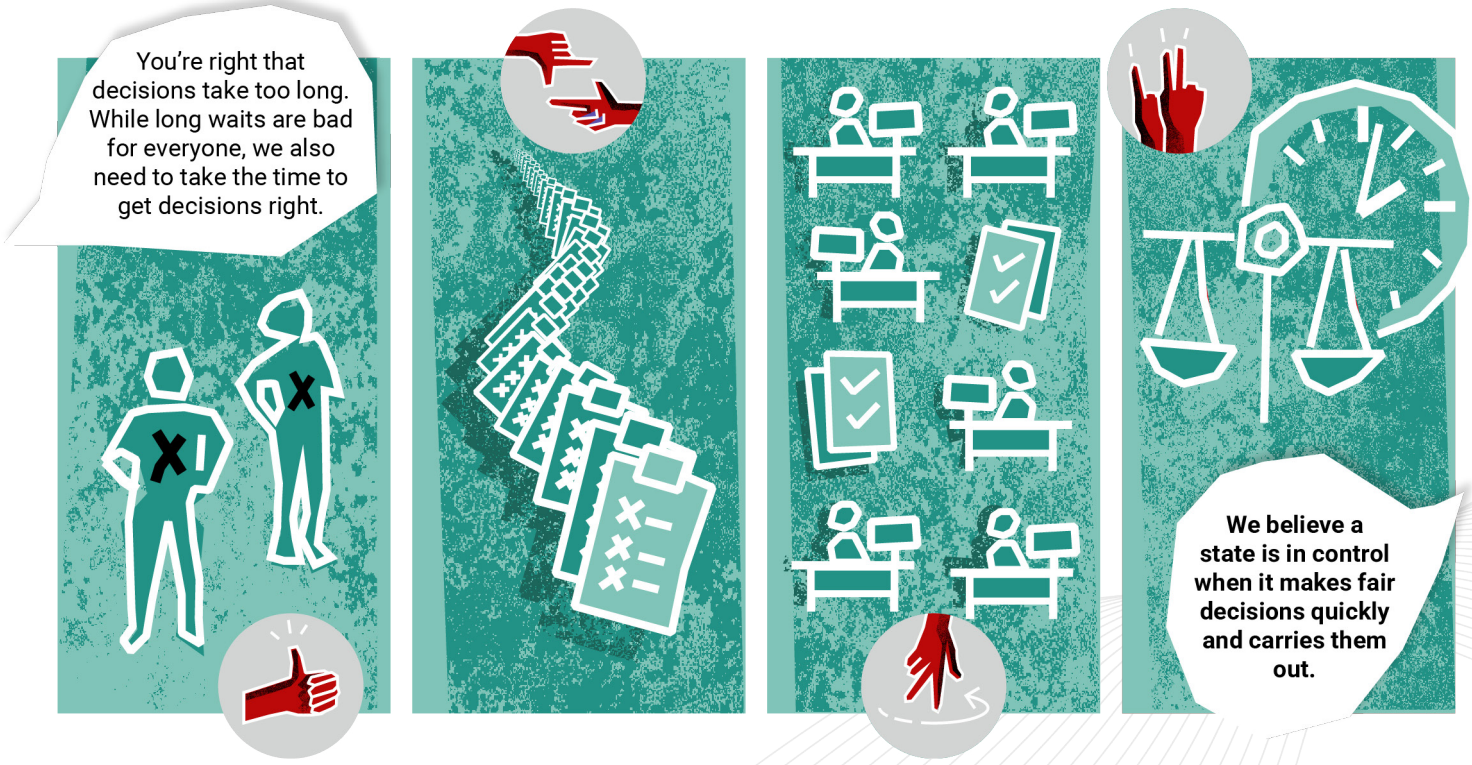
Pivot: "That's why we want enough trained staff to handle asylum claims and appeals, published waiting times, and a fully funded judiciary to handle the entire rule of law chain. People granted protection should get a clear route into language courses and work, so they can support themselves and contribute. When a claim is finally refused, that decision should be carried out where return is lawful and possible."

Core message: "We believe a state is in control when it makes fair decisions quickly and carries them out."

Where the party governs, add one concrete result, such as shorter decision times or more caseworkers hired.

Building blocks for response: trained caseworkers; access to appeal; transparent timelines; municipal funding; integration services.

Avoid: Claiming that speed requires abandoning safeguards or promising returns that cannot lawfully be carried out.



ENDNOTES

[1] Mudde, C. (2007) *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

[2] This policy brief summarises the evidence in a very short format to increase readership and understanding. Longer, more academic writing on these topics can be found extensively elsewhere. Due to space limitations, it will also consciously avoid detailed discussion of the role centre-right parties play in normalising the far right. This has also been covered extensively elsewhere, see for example: Rovira Kaltwasser, C., M. Dolezal, S. M. Van Hauwaert et al. (2024) "The transformation of the mainstream right and its impact on (social) democracy". Policy study. FEPS, April.

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[10] Valentim, V. (2024) *The Normalization of the Radical Right: A Norms Theory of Political Supply and Demand* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

[11] Schmidt-Catran, A. W. and C. S. Czymara (2023) "Political elite discourses polarize attitudes toward immigration along ideological lines: A comparative longitudinal analysis of Europe in the twenty-first century". *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 1(49): 85-109. DOI: 10.1080/1369183X.2022.2132222; Valentim, V. (2024) *The Normalization of the Radical Right: A Norms Theory of Political Supply and Demand*.

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[18] DR (2026) "Meningsmålinger". Danmarks Radio, accessed 19 November. https://www.dr.dk/nyheder/politik/meningsmaalinger

[19] Migration includes but is not just the movement of asylum seekers. Yet, in this example, Fredricksen's statements referred to asylum seekers specifically.

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[21] Schwörer, J. (ed.) (2025) "New Danish paradigms on asylum and integration: Effects and challenges".

[22] Ibid.

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ABOUT THE FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN PROGRESSIVE STUDIES (FEPS)

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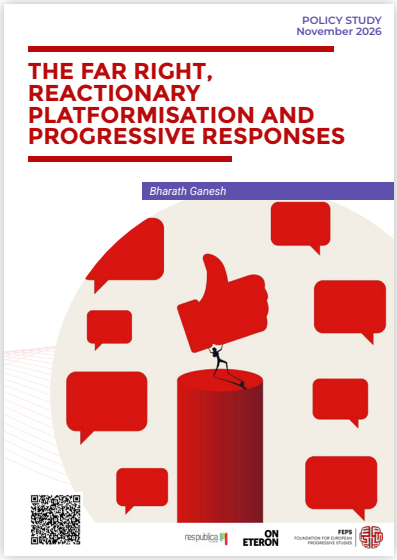
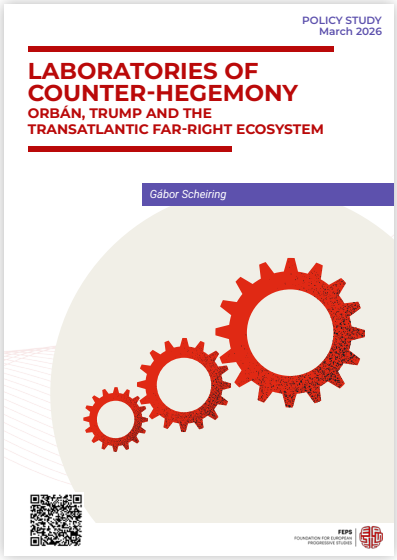
AI DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

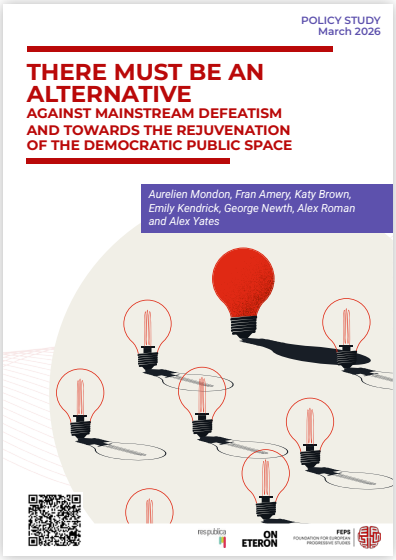
The authors prepared this text without AI assistance in the initial writing process. Grammarly, an AI-powered tool, was used during editing to enhance grammatical accuracy and orthographic clarity. Claude AI was used to suggest reframes for certain sections to enhance clarity. For the literature review, Claude AI was employed alongside exclusively non-AI-powered methods to collect relevant information for this text. All the literature suggested by AI, and cited in this text, was read in full by the authors. The authors take full responsible for this text.

ON SIMILAR TOPICS













Reframe and pivot! Putting the far right on the defensive