

English version:

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Declaration: This is neither a scientific nor a journalistic article. It is a report, in the form of a reflective essay, after six months at the Constructive Institute.

The need to change the narrative about minority citizens

There is an area in Denmark where media and politicians have built a narrative, a parallel world, that is neither accurate, the best achievable version of reality, nuanced, solution-oriented, nor conducive to democratic dialogue

Harun Nizami turns, pointing with a raised finger around the horizon.

"This is my neighbourhood," he says.

"Here I have my friends. Here you are never alone. Here I have my whole life story."

He has suggested that we meet here in a green area next to the Mjølnerparken housing estate. A few years ago, there was a deserted railway field here, which has now been converted into a park with football pitches.

Harun Nizami is 24 years old. He was born in Denmark and grew up in Mjølnerparken in Copenhagen's outer Nørrebro neighbourhood, where he lives with his mother and two siblings. His parents are divorced.

The family has been forcibly moved to another neighbourhood while the block they lived in was rebuilt and renewed as a result of the parallel society legislation passed by a majority in the Danish Parliament in 2018.

Now the family is back in Mjølnerparken in a larger and refurbished apartment. Harun Nizami is happy with it and the new green area.

"You can see how people go for walks and enjoy it. It's a big change for the neighbourhood and the residents."

When the war was raging

Harun Nizami grew up in a neighbourhood of almost 1,000 residents that a few years ago was burdened by a reputation as a hangout for gang groups. Notorious for juvenile delinquency, surveillance cameras, many years on the ghetto list and as the home of Omar Hamid el-Hussein, who carried out the terrorist attack on Krudttønden.

A major gang war in Copenhagen was at its peak in 2017, when a street gang from Northwest was at war with a criminal group from Inner Nørrebro. The period was characterised by countless shootings, several injuries, some fatalities, as well as insecurity and relocations.

A few years ago, a stray bullet fired in the gang war went through a window and into the teachers' room at Tagensbo School in Nordvest.

"The area has always been described in a certain way by the media and politicians. I feel that we were always perceived as people who couldn't do anything, who couldn't dream of anything and who weren't worth anything," says Harun Nizami.

From the green area by Mjølnerparken, we walk along a newly built road under the S-bahn and over to the Northwest neighbourhood, where Harun went to school and where many of his friends live.

The big misunderstanding

A few years ago, another major change occurred for Narun Nizami and the neighbourhood. A study, a mapping of youth life as it unfolds in the North West, was published. The study, called the Northwest Study, documented a different and far more nuanced picture of the lives of 15-18 year olds in the Copenhagen neighbourhood, which is described as a multi-ethnic deprived residential area, than previously known.

The study challenged the outside world's narrative about the neighbourhood, but above all, it revealed a paradox. That the young people in the North West had misunderstood their own lives.

-It was as if the study opened a door

Harun Nizami

The study, conducted by sociologist Aydin Soei for the City of Copenhagen, documents that young people in the Northwest believe the narrative of the neighbourhood's bad reputation and unsafe home for gang crime.

It shows that young people in the Northwest neighbourhood believe they are worse than they actually are and that they struggle with both their own prejudices and those of the outside world.

There were several examples: young people believed that living a street-orientated life is five times more common than it actually is. They underestimated that a large majority of 15-18 year olds are actually busy with studies, after-school jobs and sports activities.

Similarly, they also believed that 20 per cent of their peers in the neighbourhood are gang members, when the actual figure was 2 per cent.

The study renewed Harun Nizami's impression of himself, his friends and the whole neighbourhood he has spent his life in.

"It was like a liberation. It was a relief for me. It was as if the investigation opened a gateway, giving you the courage to go out into the world as the person you are," he explains as we move around the Northwest neighbourhood.

The erroneous story

This is where I first met Harun Nizami on a September day in 2021 on a lawn called Grønningen between the apartment blocks in the neighbourhood.

I was the only media covering the publication of the Nordvest survey for Politiken, the first in Denmark to focus on risk behaviour, leisure life and young people's own perceptions of their own lives.

The study showed a significant increase in education in the area: 76 per cent of 15-18 year olds have started an education after primary school. Nationally, 10 years ago, 40 per cent of young people in disadvantaged areas enrolled in secondary education.

Harun Nizami had helped collect questionnaires for the survey from young people in the neighbourhood. Over 400 had answered questions and participated in interviews.

At the time he said:

"I'm shocked by the responses. I can see that prejudice keeps us trapped in a false self-perception. You don't expect so much of yourself because you don't believe you have the values you need."

One of the main conclusions of the North West study is that there is a need for a major communicative effort that "both internally in the neighbourhoods and in the surrounding community helps to give a more accurate picture of the area's status in terms of safety and crime".

-You make small mistakes in the neighbourhood and make them huge.

Harun Nizami

The reasoning is obvious for several reasons. A true picture, the study states, has enormous societal importance. Previous studies from the Ministry of Justice Research Office show that crime can be reduced by 50 per cent when

young people are shown that reality is different than they think. It has been shown that if you can avoid social exaggeration, you have a simple and cheap crime prevention programme.

"The outside world judges us quickly as soon as something happens. You take small mistakes in the neighbourhood and make them huge. It demeans us and you get locked into it," said Harun Nizami in 2021.

A proof that no one can argue with

I became involved in the North West investigation because it raised questions about my work as a journalist.

For several years, I have covered gangs and crime in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. I have written about the Danish Parliament's parallel society legislation, which affects neighbourhoods with a predominance of so-called non-Western citizens. I have gradually got to know areas in Gellerup, Vollsmose, Tingbjerg, Slagelse, Helsingør and Nørrebro, and felt that the description of the vulnerable areas with many minority groups was not in line with reality.

I felt trapped in that conflict in the same way as Harun Nizami, because as a journalist it was difficult to break through with stories with nuance, proportion, perspective and edification.

It is obvious that increased ethnic diversity is often associated with conflict between the majority and (some) minorities, as formulated in the presentation for the course programme on the multi-ethnic society at Aarhus University, which I attended.

It also asks the question whether the relationship between the two groups can be improved and to what extent?

Developments in areas like the North West are always dynamic: In September 2021, when the Northwest study was published, the number of open street shootings had dropped significantly in Denmark, and in August 2021, the Danish National Police did not have a single active conflict registered in the gang communities.

The low prevalence of 15-18-year-old gang members in the area does not mean that gangs do not pose a current or future challenge that can have major consequences locally, as a limited number of gang members can create insecurity, especially during periods when gang conflicts with shootings occur in the streets.

The North West study points out that there is a real challenge with some risk behaviours that are considered serious and can contribute to a sense of insecurity in public spaces.

However, young people's exaggerated assumptions about how 'normal' it is to become a gang member "may constitute a perhaps far greater risk factor for future gang membership", the study concludes.

The study 'First link in the food chain' from the Ministry of Justice Research Office also states that 'social exaggerations inevitably play a role when groups of boys define their own behaviour as risky'.

Harun Nizami has seen his share of blood and death during gang conflicts, but he himself has never participated, travelled the gang path or committed a crime. In 2021, he was training as a designer and completing a course to mentor other young people.

-I like success stories. They motivate me

Harun Nizami

However, this report is not about crime, criminal policy or immigration policy, which are the two policy areas in which the coverage of minority citizens is often entangled.

The pillars of constructive journalism include covering nuances, promoting democratic dialogue and finding the best possible version of reality.

I have long been interested in how to build a nuanced source relationship with more difficult to access areas.

I'm investigating why the stories of disadvantaged neighbourhoods become unnuanced and inaccurate instead of nuanced, constructive and accurate. I want to make the reporting as concrete as possible about the mechanisms that may lie behind it. That's why I've returned to Harun Nizami.

Today, three years later, Harun is building his own clothing brand as a designer and has developed thousands of mostly Indian and Italian-inspired designs and accessories. He gives talks at schools about learning to cope and stand on your own two feet.

"I like success stories. They motivate me. When the North West survey came out, we got proof that no one can argue with. We are actually better than we think we are. I can shut people up with this survey. It's a kind of report card," he says.

The dangerous Fakta

I'll dive deeper into the Northwest survey, and Harun Nizami will tell us more about what the media coverage of the neighbourhood has meant to him. But first, let's turn our attention to Aarhus.

In Trillegården, a residential complex of tall concrete houses on the edge of Aarhus, 25-year-old Ikran Abdiaziz Mohamed grew up in a staircase in the living room on the right.

She shows us around her neighbourhood and points out the apartment where her family lived until a few years ago. Between the houses are lawns and playgrounds.

"It was a nice safe neighbourhood. Everybody knew everybody. We went to school together. It was like growing up in a village," she says.

The apartments are good and spacious, explains Ikran Abdiaziz Mohamed, and the residents are a mix of ethnic Danes and minority groups.

In a neighbouring building lived the poet Yahya Hassan, whom she occasionally met on her way. It was down in front of the pizzeria that he shot a rival in the foot. She points to the Fakta store where a younger guy was shot dead a few years ago.

"That's why the store was called Dangerous Fakta. There were some young guys hanging out there. Especially in the summer."

There were horrible incidents, but it didn't really affect the feeling of safety in the neighbourhood or the sense of feeling at home, she explains.

-I wanted to be a journalist for a reason. I wanted to change the narrative that was created about us

Ikran Abdiaziz Mohamed

Not my reality

Over the years, Trillegården was referred to as a vulnerable neighbourhood inhabited by brown people and with its location on what was once referred to as the Danish Parliament's ghetto list. Trillegården was associated with shootings, gangs, police calls, arrests, drugs and lack of well-being.

"Politicians talk about it. The media writes about all the negative things, and I just accepted the explanations that it was a ghetto area when this year's ghetto list was the news story. But that wasn't even half the truth. It's true that there were killings and crime, but I reached a point where I started to take things apart and I thought, this is not actually my reality that's being described. I didn't recognise the stories I was reading. I started to feel a strong resistance to the image that was being conveyed."

Ikran Abdiaziz Mohamed decided that she wanted to be a journalist. Not a doctor, as her father encouraged. In June 2024, she completed and passed her journalism programme with an A+.

"I wanted to be a journalist for a specific reason. I wanted to change the narrative that was created about us living in that neighbourhood."

Ikran Abdiaziz Mohamed, like so many others, was struck by the lack of nuance, possible solutions or constructive democratic dialogue.

"You make news when there's trouble. You take the few troublemakers and make them the image of the average brown resident and their neighbourhood, and people accept that explanation. It's generalising. I myself had reached the point where I didn't want to read the news anymore. I opted out".

The global news fatigue

Ikran Abdiaziz Mohamed is not alone in his news fatigue and news avoidance. The trend has been documented and was one of the main points at the World Association of News Media's conference in Copenhagen in May 2024.

Here, Dr Ruth Palmer, researcher in communication and digital media at IE University in Spain and co-author of the book 'Avoiding the News', outlined how 36% of people worldwide actively try to avoid news often or sometimes. That number is on the rise.

-Those who want to address news fatigue need to meet people where they are. Figuratively and literally

Ruth Palmer

According to the Reuters Institute in Oxford, England, younger people between the ages of 18 and 34 are the most likely to avoid news. In Denmark, this is 56 per cent of the age group and 29 per cent of the total population. In Germany it's 44 per cent of the population and in the UK 45 per cent.

According to Ruth Palmer's research, people give a handful of similar reasons for their news fatigue. News stories don't concern them, are uncomfortable,

contribute to powerlessness, are judgemental, untrustworthy, opaque, and under-represent certain groups.

News avoiders don't see themselves as connected to politics and see politicians as distancing and disconnected from people's lives.

According to Ruth Palmer, one way to win back the audience is not to produce more of the same news, but to get closer to the people.

"Those who want to address news fatigue need to meet people where they are. Figuratively and literally," said Ruth Palmer.

At the conference, young people from the International University College in Elsinore presented a set of values, called the Copenhagen Criteria, which they believe the media should adopt if they want to interest a younger audience. They should cultivate news values that help to understand the depth of current issues. Young people like stories that encourage and empower them to take informed action. Media should ensure a representative diversity, preferably through personal experiences that can evoke empathy and inspiration, or describe events that have an impact on those involved. They should present fact-based, unbiased information from different perspectives, according to young people.

When exaggeration wins

Here we jump back to the North West study for a moment. In its conclusions, it calls for communicative efforts as a constructive countermeasure to the erroneous perceptions that both the outside world and the young people themselves had received.

The study also refers to how international research shows that exaggerated assumptions about people's actions and attitudes are quite widespread in the population:

"People tend to pay more attention to risk and non-conforming behaviour, while individual cases and stories about crime, insecurity, drinking and smoking dominate the media and political debate. Exaggerated assumptions about reality are therefore a common size, and the majority of the Danish population has, for example, a wrong perception of the development of crime in society".

The Northwest study goes on to state:

"The gang phenomenon has in common with other forms of risk behaviour and crime, which are exaggerated in the study, that it is a phenomenon that can create moral panic and insecurity in the public debate."

This rubs off on the perception of crime:

"If you ask a random Dane whether they think crime is increasing, decreasing or unchanged, three quarters will answer incorrectly, according to the latest major study from the Ministry of Justice on the general population's assumptions about crime trends. In line with previous studies, the study shows that social misconceptions and exaggerations thrive in the population. While statistics show that over the past two decades there has been a decrease of about a third in the number of reported criminal offences, the vast majority of Danes believe that crime in society has stagnated or increased".

A correction is needed, it says, of a "widespread (self) narrative" among young people in the North West, where the vast majority are involved in education, jobs, associations, etc.

"The results can be used more broadly to create a more accurate and positive narrative about an area among its residents to increase the sense of security and pride locally," says the North West study.

-In several cases, the problems in the vulnerable areas are presented as a characteristic of the neighbourhood's residents

Research report from BUILD

The skewed media image

The need for accurate, constructive narratives and nuanced democratic dialogue is also described by other researchers.

In March 2022, a group of researchers at BUILD, the Department of Building, Urban and Environmental Design at Aalborg University, stated in a memo on research into initiatives in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. The role of the media is criticised:

"According to international research, stigmatisation of vulnerable residential areas also occurs in the media. This is partly because the media predominantly focuses on negative, spectacular events such as violence, vandalism, drug and gang violence, while the more positive stories are rarely reported. The positive or ambivalent stories about deprived areas also tend to be presented against a negative backdrop, confirming the overall negative narrative about the area. In many cases, the problems in deprived areas are presented as a characteristic of the neighbourhood's residents rather than a consequence of structural conditions in society. A line is drawn, so to speak, between the residents' actions, their residential address, and in many cases their ethnic identity, in a

so-called pathological explanation of behaviour. In many cases, the description of the areas' negative place identity is underpinned by a journalistic style where the media takes on the role of opening a window into a place where the reader is otherwise not welcome. This kind of rhetorical device increases the contradiction between 'them' and 'us'. The media therefore helps to both maintain and produce a negative identity of place. At the same time, many of the seemingly positive stories are written against a negative background, e.g. about social housing initiatives or renovation plans, thereby confirming the problems of the place."

The annual publication of disadvantaged neighbourhoods on what was until recently called the ghetto list also plays a key role in media stigmatisation, the researchers describe.

"Firstly, the national list itself generates a large number of media clips. This is particularly important for the lesser-known neighbourhoods on the list, which do not normally appear in the media and therefore gain a media identity simply because they are on the list. Secondly, the largest and best-known vulnerable neighbourhoods, such as Vollsmose and Gellerupparken, are often used as examples by which other areas are measured and assessed. Here, the areas get their place identity not from their specific context and specific lived experiences in the area, but from their position - at the top - of the national list and as the reason for the Danish parallel society policy. Danish parallel society policy thus contributes to the stigmatisation of the areas, which it also aims to rectify. Media coverage affects residents' perception of their neighbourhood and their perception of what others think of them."

-If you're portrayed as the bad guys, there's a high risk of becoming bad

Harun Nizami

Everyone here knows it

I'm back with Harun Nizami from Mjølnerparken in Copenhagen. It's the month of May. We've bought a cup of coffee.

"If you're described as the bad guys, there's a big risk of becoming bad. The possibility of becoming a criminal was huge for me, but I chose a different path. I have a talent, a passion that I would rather utilise. I have a long-term goal," he says.

Harun Nizami gives talks at schools about finding your own talent, following your dream, your hobby and living the life you want.

"In the media, we are generally portrayed as people who can't dream of anything. You get trapped in that media image and it still happens, but we've also become stronger," he says.

"Everyone who lives in this area knows that what is written about us is not true. If you have an understanding of life, you know that, and that goes for all so-called deprived areas."

So why is that narrative still alive, we ask.

"Because we who live here keep it to ourselves. You don't speak out against it because the negative reputation seems insurmountable. But if your inner self

is strong enough, you can win, but it's a battle between you and society. It always is."

However, the battle is never lost, he believes.

"Not even for my father, who is a chef and has always had the perception of being looked down upon and not being recognised, even though everyone loves his food. He still follows the news, and it confirms that the others don't want us. But the question is, who are 'they'? Is it the citizens, the politicians or society?"

Harun Nizami himself has given up following the news.

"When the media makes fun of us, it mostly seems like a circus. I find it hard to take it seriously and I don't follow it. I've experienced a lot of hate from the media. There was a kind of hate that makes you feel insecure because you don't feel appreciated. But it can also create a motivation. A drive to move on. I'd rather move on and make a difference."

-When the media started writing about radicalisation, it affected me even more

Ikran Abdiaziz Mohamed

Joked that it was a ghetto

At Trillegården in Aarhus, Ikran Abdiaziz Mohamed explains how she switched to a school in the city centre and encountered a completely different environment.

"If people asked me where I lived, I was always embarrassed about it. When I had friends over, I found it a bit embarrassing. The block was a bit dank, it smelled a bit like weed, the flats were all in a row and didn't look inviting. There were no cafés, no city life beyond the classic pizzeria. I joked that it was a ghetto before anyone had mentioned it. To get ahead of the prejudice. That way I accepted it and passed it on. I joked that it was a shitty area, even though we had it pretty good here. In that way, I helped spread the narrative about the ghetto and gangs," she says.

She confirms the statement in March 2022 from a group of researchers at BUILD, the Department of Building, Urban and Environmental Design at Aalborg University:

"The media therefore both helps to maintain and produce a negative place identity".

According to Ikran Abdiaziz Mohamed, the media stories became about everyone who lived in the area,

"It was unfair. People outside the neighbourhood had a hard time separating it. So people judged me without knowing me. I was lumped in with that group and prejudged for something I hadn't done. When the media started writing about radicalisation, it affected me even more. My scarf means so much to me that I will never take it off. If I was walking in the centre of Aarhus, I was always nervous that someone would think I was radicalised. The media coverage was all around me all the time. Islam, radicalisation, brown young people, shootings, dangerous ghettos. What kind of one-sided rubbish was that?"

Fewer sources from minority areas

Perhaps it's relevant here to point to a study of media use of sources called 'Dem vi (stadig) taler om' from 2022 by Associate Professor Hanne Jørndrup from the Centre for News Research, Roskilde University.

Through a quantitative analysis, the study focuses on whether and how Danish news media include minority citizens not only in news about refugees and immigrants but in the news in general.

The study includes 1,244 news stories from 14 selected days in 2021 with 3,045 sources from seven newspapers and four TV news programmes:

According to Statistics Denmark, in 2021, 14% of Denmark's population are either immigrants or descendants, but make up only 3.5% of news sources.

This is a decline from the previous survey (in 2016) where minority citizens made up 12.3% of the population but 4% of news sources.

-At the same time, it's a highly politicised topic dominated by a preponderance of ethnic Danish politicians

Hanne Jørndrup

"Our figures from three studies over 10 years show that the gap between the demographic share of the minority population and the share of minority sources in the news is widening over time," the study concludes and continues:

"The majority of the few non-Western sources are found in stories on specific topics, here called minority source news reserves. In particular, immigration, integration and crime are topics where non-Western sources appear".

"Non-Western sources make up almost 20% of the sources in the news about foreigners and integration, but at the same time it is a highly politicised topic dominated by a preponderance of ethnic Danish politicians."

As a final point, it adds:

"Less than 1% of the 1244 news stories in the study were made by a journalist with a minority background".

In a concluding paragraph, Hanne Jørndrup writes:

"Refugees, immigrants and their descendants are more than just a topic of debate, they are also citizens who live and work in Danish society. How these citizens are included in the news and how often they are given a voice in the public debate is a key issue that affects both minority citizens themselves and society as a whole."

Danes' knowledge of integration

Over the years, the issue of immigration and integration has also given rise to a number of other studies and research projects.

In the autumn of 2021, the Knowledge Centre for Integration and Monday Morning published a study on Danes' knowledge of integration: Citizens were asked about their perceptions of immigrants and descendants in Denmark, which were then compared with the actual figures in the area. The main conclusion is that the citizens of Denmark have a far more

pessimistic view of how integration is progressing than the actual figures from Statistics Denmark, for example, show. The interviewees overshoot the mark in their ideas about how many immigrants and descendants are criminals, unemployed, anti-democratic, etc. The analysis also shows that the misconceptions about integration come from both citizens with minority and ethnic Danish backgrounds (Videnscenter for integration & Mandag Morgen, 2021).

The study cannot conclude why the picture is so much more pessimistic on the issue of integration, but Monday Morning's editor-in-chief Tanja Nystrup Madsen does not hesitate in 2021 to place part of the blame on the image that the news media paints of integration, immigrants and descendants.

The big democratic problem

According to sociologist and author Aydin Soey, who conducted the Northwest study for the City of Copenhagen, the lack of and one-sided coverage is a democratic problem.

This relates to another pillar of constructive journalism, which is based on promoting democratic dialogue by including citizens and communities.

"If you as a media want to maintain the narrative that you are both critical of those in power but also contribute to the broad democratic dialogue where everyone has a voice, then everyone should be able to have their say in the public debate as far as possible, and if there is a certain group that does not and is only allowed to speak out in stories where they are problematised, then you are not living up to the obligation to contribute to the broad democratic dialogue. I think this is a huge democratic problem if you want a Denmark

where we create a narrative of citizenship, solidarity and loyalty that transcends ethnic and geographical boundaries," he says.

-This can have a real impact on where you place your tick

Aydin Soei

Aydin Soei continues:

"If we lived in a country where the media was dominated by private actors and market conditions, you could say it's just about writing the stories that your target audience is interested in and selling newspapers. But we live in a country where the media is state-subsidised. Danish media wouldn't exist without it, and the reason we as a population pay for the media to exist is that they can contribute to the democratic dialogue, so I think we can demand more."

In addition, according to the aforementioned study of Danes' knowledge of integration, 80 per cent of the population are typically wrong when judging how integration is progressing in society. This can have an impact, emphasises Aydin Soey

"If you believe that crime is significantly higher among ethnic minorities, that there is significantly less employment, that there are significantly fewer people taking education and more people with undemocratic attitudes, which was also asked in the survey, how inclined are you to vote for a more lenient immigration policy?"

This can also affect attitudes towards crime and punishment, he believes.

"If the perception is much worse than the reality, you might be more inclined to think that we should punish for a long time and that we should solve crime problems among ethnic minorities by deporting them. So it can have a real impact on where you vote and it can have a real impact on the trust we have in each other across ethnic and geographical boundaries."

The power of definition at Christiansborg

There are several factors at play. A perceived one-sided coverage of ethnic minority groups, documented declining representation in the media and documented poor factual knowledge among Danes about integration.

In sociologist Aydin Soei's experience, this puts the power to define how integration is progressing and how to react in the hands of politicians in Christiansborg.

"Just wanting to discuss integration on an informed, objective basis can provoke many politicians because they have been used to the fact that they are the ones who define the reality of integration, and because it is such an important political issue and the issue that has moved the most votes across the centre since 2001," he says.

Aydin Soey believes this fact can be exploited politically.

"The majority of Danes have no contact with ethnic minorities, and geographically, there is a huge imbalance in just being able to have contact with ethnic minorities and seeing them as fellow citizens in your immediate life, because over half of all the country's minorities are concentrated in the ten largest cities. This means that the multi-ethnic society is a metropolitan

phenomenon, and as soon as you move outside the big cities, Denmark is almost a white reality. This means that when it comes to ethnic minorities, Christiansborg has enormous definitional power, and this is possible partly because the minority citizen group is not a particularly powerful group."

Christiansborg is definitely a huge platform in terms of the great public debate. But there are also widespread attitudes among ethnic minorities that the media and journalists don't like them.

But the reality is more nuanced, says Aydin Soey.

"In the current political debate, major and leading parties have realised that you have to cover the flank called immigration policy at all costs, so you don't bleed voters in the same way as you have done in the past. Therefore, you have to be tough and offensive on immigration policy. So just going in and saying that we recognise that integration in Denmark is going better than ever can be seen as a sign of weakness. So if you as an independent journalist want to set an agenda, it has to coincide with an agenda that leading parties in Parliament are interested in promoting."

-This policy is a prerequisite for winning elections

Fredrik Vad, immigration spokesperson, S

One of the most important areas

The enormous importance of immigration policy was emphasised by Social Democrat integration spokesperson Frederik Vad in an interview in Berlingske

in January 2024, after he had defined what he called 'ruler attitude' and 'dominance behaviour' from the rostrum of the Danish Parliament and stated that parallel societies can be found everywhere. From stigmatised residential areas to the Panum Institute to canteen tables in government agencies.

"I have a bit of a love-hate relationship with immigration; I'm very drawn to it because it's one of the most important things, but I'm also a bit intimidated by it. It's one of the most important areas you can deal with," he told Berlingske.

The trick will be to maintain the strict immigration policy, even if the public mood changes, according to Frederik Vad.

Even if it means losing elections, according to Berlingske.

"This policy is a prerequisite for winning elections," replied the rapporteur.

Frederik Vad Nielsen was backed by Social Democrats Kaare Dybvad Bek, Minister for Immigration and Integration, and Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen.

Duvet jackets and gold chains

In October 2020, Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen gave the opening speech from the rostrum of the Danish Parliament.

Among the minister's topics was the government's 'security package', which included a number of tough new measures against unsafe behaviour.

According to the speech, these measures are particularly aimed at "young men from non-Western backgrounds" who "take other people's freedom, steal children's futures, break prison guards - and leave a long trail of insecurity".

The Prime Minister's speech was criticised for stigmatising rhetoric. The speech is part of 25-year-old Jeppe Kjærsgaard's teaching programme at Aarhus University, as an example of how a head of state defines a country and a culture. Jeppe Kjærsgaard teaches political sociology at the Department of Political Science.

- In this way, it's a case of 'us' versus 'them'

Mette Frederiksen, Prime Minister, S

In her speech, the Prime Minister begins a section on harsh punishments by recounting a visit to Motalavej, a residential area in Korsør that has been characterised by unrest:

"In too many places, insecurity has been allowed to take root. Should we accept that there are places in Denmark where ordinary people should be afraid to be?"

Mette Frederiksen notes that growing up conditions are unevenly distributed.

"And without generalising - without lumping everyone together - we have to deal with the facts. To the raw statistics. One in five young men with a non-Western background born in 1997 had violated the Criminal Code before the age of 21. One in five," the minister repeats.

She mentions that girls are called derogatory names because they are Danish, or are subjected to social control because they have become too Danish.

"In the particularly vulnerable neighbourhoods, one percent of the residents commit almost half of the crime when you consider the severity of the crime. In this way, it's a case of 'us' versus 'them'," she says.

Finally, the minister concludes:

"In the future, the police should therefore also be able to ban all persons from certain places for a limited period of time. This could be in a car park in a residential area or at a S-train station where these boys and young men gather and create insecurity.

Here we say: Don't stand here. No one should be afraid to walk the streets in Denmark - you will not be allowed to take our freedom.

If the stay ban is not respected, the punishment must be clear, consistent and noticeable. The first time a fine of DKK 10,000.

And if you have a debt to the public sector - it could be unpaid bills for previous offences - there will be a cash settlement.

Then the police should be able to take down duvet jackets, watches, gold necklaces, mobile phones, or whatever else they may have of value immediately."

Rhetoric and powerlessness

Jeppe Kjærgaard believes that the speech is an example of the struggle for definition.

"My point is that when you draw these boundaries and say that one in five young people under the age of 21, when you narrow down these specific people and say that this is actually a case of 'us' versus 'them', I think that's really problematic. There are those with the duvet jackets, and there are you. And then there are the rest of us who want democracy. Mette Frederiksen then lists a number of things that she defines as Danish. "These people on Motalavej must get the feeling that it's not actually up to them to define. It's the Danish Prime Minister who can point the finger and say that you're not part of it anymore. When she stands on a rostrum and draws this border around them, I think it is extremely counterproductive. I would go so far as to say it's dangerous rhetoric."

In Europe, the symbolic borders drawn around Middle Eastern immigrants and their children have become increasingly rigid and exclusive. There is a broad consensus in the scientific literature that external symbolic boundaries have an impact on individuals' self-identifications. A previous study from Aarhus University in 2018 by Kristine Bakkær Simonsen, 'What It Means to (Not) Belong', showed that many young people from ethnic minority groups express that they would like a clearer definition of belonging from more ethnic Danes. They are, so to speak, waiting for approval from someone other than themselves.

According to Jeppe Kjærgaard, the rhetoric in the Prime Minister's opening speech from 2020 does not solve the problem the minister is addressing. Instead, the speech can feed powerlessness.

"Powerlessness is a frustrating feeling, especially when it comes to something as personal as your self-image and how your fellow citizens see the group you belong to. I think powerlessness has a negative impact if you don't feel welcome and can't influence whether you feel welcome. Then I think you're more likely to also be against the system you're part of."

The encounter with three statements

Other examples of the impact of defining statements from top politicians include a 2022 study by Assistant Professor Sharan Grewal and political scientist Shadi Hamid, published in the *American Journal of Political Science* and the only one of its kind in the world.

The study was presented at a course on the multi-ethnic society at Aarhus University in spring 2024.

The two researchers conducted an attitude survey among 1,300 Muslims in Germany, where 53 per cent of respondents indicated that they had personally experienced discrimination or hostility.

The study concludes that Muslims' personal experiences of discrimination correlate with anti-system attitudes: higher support for violence and Islamism and lower support for democracy and secularism.

"Discriminated Muslims appear to reject the system that created hostility towards them," the authors write.

But the study also provided "unique causal evidence that political inclusion could mitigate this dynamic".

-Islam is part of Germany

Angela Merkel

The researchers divided the 1,330 survey respondents into four groups: a control group, which received no preparation, and three treatment groups, each of which was prepared with factual information about inclusive and/or exclusive rhetoric and policies from prominent German leaders. The first group was prepared with the inclusive rhetoric and policies of Chancellor Angela Merkel CDU/CSU, unique in the EU at the time. In particular, her statement that "Islam is part of Germany" and recent German legislation to combat hate speech against Muslims. The other two groups faced exclusionary rhetoric and policies from Interior Minister Horst Seehofer CDU/CSU and from the far-right AfD, Alternative for Germany, leader Alexander Gauland. Reproduced from the study 'Discrimination, inclusion and anti-system attitudes among Muslims in Germany':

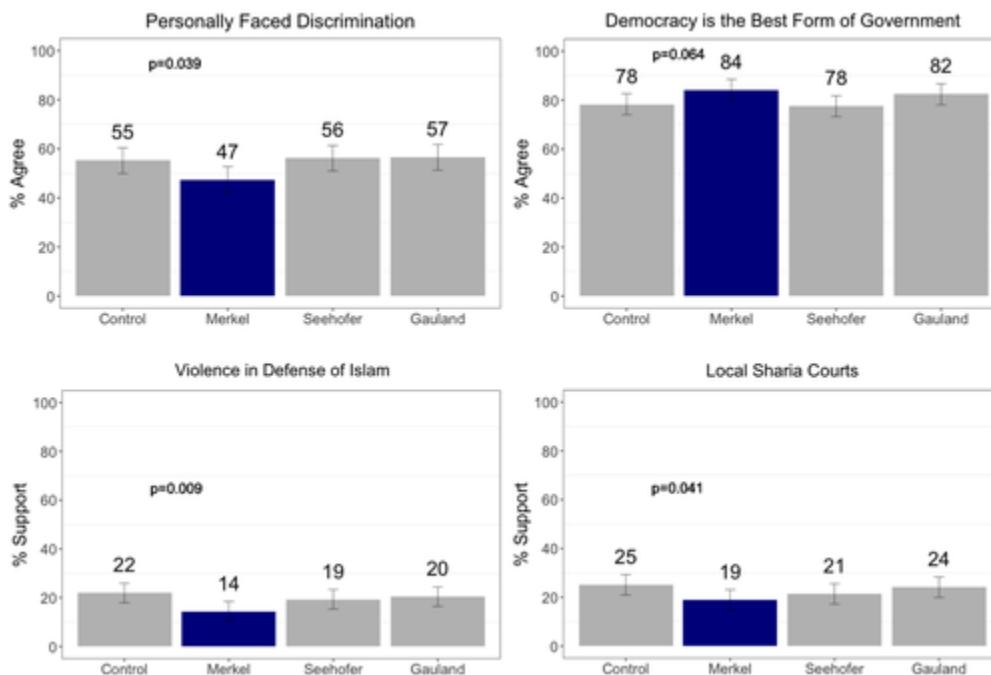
Merkel German Chancellor Angela Merkel CSU/CDU has stated that "Islam is part of Germany," noting that "we are stronger together." Germany has taken in more Muslim refugees than any other country in Europe and introduced laws to defend Muslims against hate speech.

Seehofer German Interior Minister Horst Seehofer CSU/CDU has stated that "Islam does not belong to Germany," noting that Germany should not "abandon its traditions and customs." Germany has recently put a cap on Muslim refugees, while hate crimes are increasingly targeting Muslims.

Gauland AfD leader Alexander Gauland has stated that "Islam does not belong to Germany," noting that "the values of Islam are not compatible with our constitution." Germany has recently put a cap on Muslim refugees, while hate crimes are increasingly targeting Muslims.

The results show that compared to the control group, preparing Muslims with Merkel's inclusive rhetoric and policies produced significantly lower perceptions of personal discrimination (47 vs. 55%), lower support for violence (14 vs. 22%), lower support for Sharia courts (19 vs. 25%), and higher support for democracy (84 vs. 78%).

These results, the researchers write, "provide some of the first systematic, experimental data showing that inclusive rhetoric and policy can reduce anti-system attitudes among Muslim minorities in Europe".



Source: 'Discrimination, inclusion and anti-system attitudes among Muslims in Germany'

Respondents had lived in Germany for an average of 24 years and 66% were German citizens. Around 44% were of Turkish origin, with a further 20% from the Middle East (including 10% from Syria). The vast majority lived in West Germany (87%) or Berlin.

Inclusion has an effect

Can discrimination dynamics be improved and how, the researchers ask, and answer in their concluding paragraph:

"The study also provided unique causal evidence that political inclusion could mitigate these dynamics. Through preparation and natural experiments, it shows that Merkel's inclusive rhetoric and policies had a causal effect that reduced perceptions of discrimination and in turn reduced anti-system attitudes. "For policymakers concerned about the 'radicalisation' of Muslim populations, the results highlight that political inclusion can be an effective approach to reduce support for violence and Sharia and increase support for democracy," the researchers write.

"Such political inclusion may reduce Muslims' perceptions of discrimination and in turn reduce their associated anti-system sentiments."

The researchers conclude:

"Although it is beyond the scope of this study, we do not believe that the theory is limited to Germany or to Muslims".

The above ties into the constructive journalism pillar of not only exposing the problem but also pointing to possible solutions.

-It was as if she took images and scenarios from different places and put them together into a Lego figure

Harun Nizami

A fictional person with brown skin

Harun Nizami from Mjølnerparken in Copenhagen clearly remembers Mette Frederiksen's opening speech from the rostrum of the Danish Parliament, and her definition of the unsafe young men in down jackets, gold necklaces and expensive watches.

"We talked about it at home the day after it came out. My mum was shocked. It's probably the most direct thing said to individuals by the Prime Minister. I wasn't personally affected, but it wasn't okay at all," he says.

"It was as if she took pictures and scenarios from different places and put them together into a Lego figure. A fictional person with brown skin, a duvet jacket and gold chains. But where is he? Is it a 15-year-old? Is it a 20-year-old? I haven't seen him, it's not any of my friends she's talking about."

Harun Nizami is wearing a black duvet jacket even on this day.

"Is this jacket too much. I've wondered a lot about whether I'm sending an unsafe signal because I look the way I do. I live in Mjølnerparken, after all. This speculation bothers me and makes me feel insecure," he says.

He has a friend, he explains, who is a financial economist and wears expensive jackets and Rolex watches.

"You can't define a person by a watch. But a direct signal was made about this fictional person. A dress code was mentioned, and there is no doubt that this is a person with a different ethnic background."

-It's just us, us, us

Harun Nizami

He compares it to spectator behaviour at football matches.

"When FCK plays against Brøndby, it's Danish boys who cause unrest, drink massive amounts of beer and throw up in S-train seats. Then I feel a certain unease. What about all that? It's not mentioned. It's just us, us, us. You really have to be careful about what kind of images you create."

Harun Nizami's sister works in public administration. His mother is an unskilled kitchen assistant.

"My mum has always said that we have to accomplish something, that we have to set goals. If it wasn't for my mum, I wouldn't be where I am today. Don't we live in a society where we have to motivate each other? If we are to continue as

a welfare society? The more success stories I get, the more I want to do something for the country."

A untouched story

There are actually several opportunities to seek out big, broad success stories with universal relevance and importance.

In May 2024, the annual 'Report on Parallel Societies' was published by the Ministry of Social Affairs, Housing and Elderly Affairs.

It shows that in 2022, the proportion of people aged 18 to 64 years outside education and the labour market in vulnerable residential areas decreased by 2.1 percentage points measured from 1 January 2022 and one year ahead.

Overall, the report shows that residents are earning more because they are generally becoming better educated and are entering the labour market in increasing numbers. The average gross income increased by DKK 8,800 during the period.

At the same time, crime in the neighbourhoods has decreased.

It appears that the proportion of residents in the areas who have been convicted of offences against the Criminal Code, the Firearms Act or the Narcotics Act within the past two years has fallen by 0.2 percentage points during 2022.

Chief Analyst Kristine Vasiljeva from Danmarks Almene Boliger says about the decrease in crime:

"When the starting point is that just over two per cent of residents have received a conviction during the two years, this decrease in convictions for crime in one year corresponds to approximately 10 per cent".

The positive trend has been consistently present for several years in a row, the chief analyst points out.

However, after a search, the report is not mentioned independently in any news media. Only one trade journal reported the story.

Police call for new narrative

At this point, I seek out a practical player who has been directly involved with criminal culture, disadvantaged neighbourhoods and the media's and politicians' perceptions on a daily basis and for several years. Allan Aarslev, police commissioner at the East Jutland Police, has been head of the police district's preventive work and anti-radicalisation strategies since 2001. He was one of the driving forces behind the conflict counselling and anti-radicalisation programme, the Aarhus Model, which became known worldwide. The efforts were sought out by media and journalists from around the globe, and I'm interested in his understanding of the dynamics between citizens, minority areas, media and national politicians.

"You get a certain sympathy for young people who come from socially disadvantaged families and you get a great insight into how to develop policing so that society can actually do something," he says.

As previously mentioned, the crime aspect plays an overriding role when the media and politicians talk about ethnic minority groups and neighbourhoods.

"The experience has been that it's not easy to create understanding if the police want to nuance the understanding of dynamics and preventive efforts. When it comes to criminal culture and the question of being able to take action early on, it often becomes too complicated for anyone to think they should write about it."

Fear of history

Allan Aarslev has a desire to change narratives in general.

"When I look at the crime statistics, it's clear that no one needs to fear living in Gellerup. It may well be that for historical reasons there are a few more criminals living there, but the insecurity that people perceive is due to a history that goes back a very long way," he says.

"We have said that you have to work to change the history that has been built up over 25-30 years, and you don't just do that by tearing down some blocks and making sure that some residents go elsewhere, although that's also a great strategy. Safety in Gellerup is lower than in other neighbourhoods, but it's not because of crime. It's because of the history. So it's about nuance."

-You need to describe the stories better so that people understand what this is all about.

Allan Aarslev

The dynamics are complicated to communicate. Also to the national political level.

"You need to describe the stories better so that people understand what this is all about. Because if politicians don't really think that what we have is something they can use because it's too complicated to carry forward, then it won't really materialise. Then we won't get any support for it."

A current example is a genealogy-based police investigation that the East Jutland Police want to practise. The initial results of the investigation turned out to be of a scope that the police authority had to react to.

"We reacted because the investigation showed that we need to help some children at an early age while they are at home with their parents. But in the media and among national politicians, the focus was on the number of criminal parents, and that wasn't really the point, so the story slipped into a kind of immigration policy rather than becoming a prevention policy."

It was an example, he believes, of politicians defining what the problem was about.

"From a media perspective, it was the politicians who ran with the definition, but we are still the ones who define what action needs to be taken. It's important to understand the complexity correctly, and if you do that, society can actually benefit in monetary terms, in terms of the feeling of safety, which has an impact on health, and in terms of the perception of safety."

Media must rethink their role

Ikran Abdiaziz Mohamed from Trillegården in Aarhus spent her time as a trainee journalist at the newspaper Politiken. Along the way, she received emails thanking her for what she wrote.

"They wrote, thank you for giving us a voice. It showed me how much power and importance you really have as a journalist. How careful you have to be because what you write matters. I was given importance. Journalists themselves don't realise how important it is to write the way you do," she says.

It is therefore natural to let Ikran Abdiaziz Mohamed formulate journalistic advice for colleagues who want to cover minority citizens and their neighbourhoods in a constructive way:

"The media focus too one-sidedly on a neighbourhood like mine, explaining only part of the story and letting that be the picture of the whole area. I realise what these kinds of stories can do to you, especially when every other media outlet jumps on board. They can get politicians on board. I don't think politicians would have been after us so much if the media didn't write the way they did."

- If the media continues as it is now, the stories won't be correct

Ikran Abdiaziz Mohamed

A central dogma of constructive journalism is to take the angle and narrative to a new level, asking: what next? How do we come up with solutions?

Ikran Abdiaziz Mohamed points out that first and foremost, media outlets need to rethink how they choose to tell stories about ethnic minority citizens.

"If media continues as it is now, it won't be correct stories. Journalists have a responsibility for the assumptions they make, and journalists must work against stereotypical assumptions. It's about dropping laziness and doing your research so that you are equipped to cover reality as well as possible. We have

to tell reality as we see and experience it, but you also have to tell other parts of the story. I think you have a broader responsibility as a journalist when you're faced with a media image that is not accurate. You have to go out into the environment and spend time to gain understanding. Otherwise you risk generalising an entire group. This can have consequences for people like me, for example, who just took the stories to heart. I think we need to change the narrative, not just because I'm an ethnic minority, but because I am the person I am."

They will exploit you

At the international media conference, Wanifra, at the end of May, Dr Ruth Palmer, researcher in communication and digital media at IE University in Spain and co-author of the book 'Avoiding the News', discussed how many civic groups are not represented, respected and reflected in the media.

This led her co-author of 'Avoiding the News' and political scientist Rasmus Kleis Nielsen from the Reuters Institute in Oxford, England to conclude the following:

"Media needs to connect with groups that don't feel represented. That's our foundation, and if we don't have that connection, we have nothing. That leaves the powers that be and they don't care about you. They only want to exploit you."

General advice for journalists who want to report or go deeper into minority issues:

- Be aware of the so-called definitional struggle in the field
- Have a critical mind. Question politicians' statements about seemingly factual matters
- Research current figures in the field. There are many factual sources. Be aware of whether factual information is being used fairly in the political debate
- Contact experts who can explain the context
- Realise that this is a complex and politically charged area
- Get out into neighbourhoods and areas and create a network of sources
- Most neighbourhoods are fairly well organised and have representatives who are happy to help a journalist
- Take your time. Many people actually want to talk and be listened to
- Be aware that many people care a lot about their neighbourhood
- Understand that the resident composition is diverse, but that most people consider themselves Danes
- Include ethnic minorities in types of stories where it is not skin colour, ethnicity or religion that is important, but the position as a citizen in Danish society
- For example, stories about housing and food prices, family life, attitudes towards public school

-A number of solution-oriented social housing initiatives anchored in neighbourhoods across the country are concrete and working examples of possible journalistic constructive stories.