

# **THE PARALLEL SOCIETY LEGISLATION: SOCIAL ENGINEERING IN RADICAL NEIGHBOURHOOD REGENERATION**

**RIKKE SKOVGAARD NIELSEN, 2023**



**DEPARTMENT OF THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT**  
AALBORG UNIVERSITY

# Agenda: zooming in

- The background: From list to legislation
- The tools of the legislation
- The pros and cons of the plan
- Zooming out



# Background: From list to legislation

2004/5: First policy on parallel societies

2010: First ghetto list

- The “early Christmas present”
- Limited funds/measures involved

2018: New ghetto legislation passed by broad coalition

2019: Development plans for ‘hard ghettos’ submitted to and approved by the minister

2020: New rhetoric. But too late?  
The word has a sticky nature...

2021: Introduction of a new list: Prevention areas



# The word 'ghetto'

“It is crazy to talk about ghettos in a welfare state like the Danish. There are no ghettos in Denmark. When the Danish government composes lists of socially deprived neighbourhoods and publish them yearly, it is not only a manifestation of a sick way of thinking, it is also an idiotic policy that ultimately pushes the socially deprived areas further down into the mud. In the end it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. It is a worrying tendency that we unfortunately have seen in most of Western Europe the last two decades” (Wacquant, 2013).



# The definitions

**Note: Only social/non-profit housing, 1000+ residents**

Vulnerable neighbourhood – min. two of four criteria:

- **>40%** of residents aged 18-64 without relation to labour market or educational system
- Share of residents convicted of violation of the Penal Code, the Gun Law or the Act on Euphoriant Substances amounts to at least **3 times the national average**
- **>60%** of residents aged 30-59 only has basic education
- Average gross income for residents aged 15-64 in the area (excluding students) is **less than 55%** of the average gross income within the region

~~“Ghetto”: a vulnerable neighbourhood, >50% non-western immigrants and descendants~~

~~“Hard ghetto”: a “ghetto” for five consecutive years~~

Parallel society

Restructuring area



# Prevention areas, since 2021

**Note: Only social/non-profit housing, 1000+ residents**

Prevention area – min. two of four criteria:

- **>30%** of residents aged 18-64 without relation to labour market or educational system
- Share of residents convicted of violation of the Penal Code, the Gun Law or the Act on Euphoriant Substances amounts to at least **2 times the national average**
- **>60%** of residents aged 30-59 only has basic education
- Average gross income for residents aged 15-64 in the area (excluding students) is **less than 65%** of the average gross income within the region

AND >30% non-western immigrants and descendants

- Spill-over to other areas – prevention of prevention?
- Municipal allocation – from 25% to 100%



## Five criteria – but one real focus?

- In reality an integration policy?
- The connotations of originally calling the areas ‘ghettos’
- Only a ‘ghetto’ if more than 50% ethnic minorities

*”For decades we have let too many refugees and family-reunified immigrants into Denmark, who hasn’t become integrated in the Danish society. And they have been allowed to huddle together in the ghetto areas with no contact to the surrounding society.” (A Denmark without parallel societies, pp.5)*



# The legislation measures

## The underlying ideas

- A comprehensive approach of radical physical restructuring coupled with social engineering
  - Physical and social efforts simultaneously
- Focus on the area (more so than the individual)
- Change through in-movers and the would-be-leavers (rather than changing the situation of the stayers)
- Combines policies within housing, crime, childcare and education





# The tools of the legislation

Three types of tools within housing policy:

1. Physical restructuring and lowering the number of social housing for families
2. Stricter rules for renting
3. Prioritisation of funds for social and infrastructural initiatives

Combined with measures in other policy fields e.g.:

- Strengthened police-enforcement and tougher penalties
- Language tests in Grade 0, compulsory day-care, sanctioning of worst-performing public schools and redistribution of children from vulnerable n'hoods between day-care centres



# Tool no. 1: radical restructuring

Physical restructuring and lowering the number of social housing for families

- Physical restructuring – max. 40% family social housing
  - Demolition, changed tenure type, selling off, densification
  - Public institutions, public workplaces
  - Infrastructural changes, “opening up”, sports and leisure facilities
- New possibilities for a total liquidation of neighbourhoods
- Permission to terminate tenants when selling off social housing



# Tool no. 2: social engineering

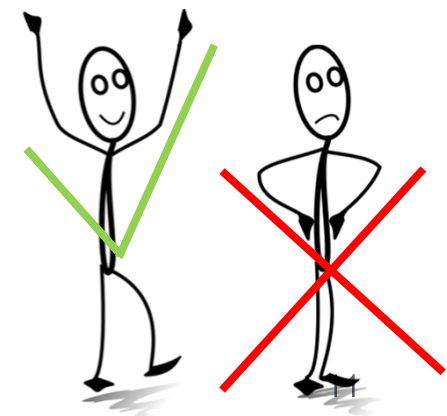
## Stricter rules for renting

- Mandatory use of flexible letting: employed people and students skip waiting list
- Possible to reject people on waiting list if unemployed or have criminal record
- Termination of contract for criminals + household (for crime in n'hood)
- No placement of refugees
- Above can also apply for private rental in the area

Attracting new residents through offering other tenures and more attractive areas

## Branding – e.g. through new names

- The stickiness of the 'ghetto' stigma



# Tool no. 3: funding

## Prioritisation of funds for social and infrastructural initiatives

- Funds from The National Building Fund – i.e. from the residents
- No state funding
- Cut from 31+ mio. EUR to 18.8 mio EUR yearly
- Primarily funds for areas on the list – no funding for:
  - Areas at risk for ending up on the list
  - Areas that do not match criteria (e.g. less than 1000 residents)

# Development in areas on the list since 2018

	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Prevention area	-	-	-	62	67
Vulnerable neighbourhood	43	40	25	20	17
Parallel society (“ghetto”)	29	28	15	10	12
Restructuring area (“hard ghetto”)	15	15	13	10	9

Note: A ‘mouse trap’ = 17 undergoing restructuring

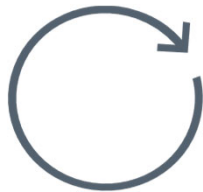


# Housing areas with a development plan

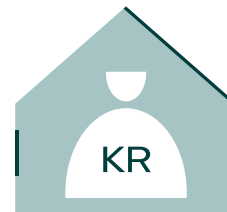
Initiatives in the 17 housing areas with an approved development plan:



New-built  
**10.500**



Tenure change  
**1.150**



Sale  
**650**



Demolition  
**4.000**

# So, is it working?

Yes, says the minister (examples from 2021):

- “It is extremely positive that the good development continues in so many areas. This is the fourth year in a row that the number of parallel societies has fallen, and we are thus continuing to see the effects of the parallel society package take hold.”
- “It is positive that the most vulnerable residential areas can also move out of the parallel society list. However, it is crucial that development plans continue so that municipalities and housing associations transform the areas into mixed neighbourhoods once and for all. And with the new legislation on prevention, we are also taking the next step in the fight against parallel societies.”

But is it really working? Depends on the goal...



# The pros and cons

Main points of critique of the overall plan:

- Too large a plan on too limited knowledge base
  - Taking radical to a new level...
- Too little focus on the displaced residents and the receiving areas
- Too much 'one size fits all' and too little room for local adaption
- The seeming randomness of the plan in terms of criteria, thresholds etc.
- The rhetoric...





# The pros and cons

But also good aspects of the plan:

- A much-needed physical lift in some of the areas
- Forcing ostrich-municipalities to act
- A focus on the children of the areas and securing a good start in life
- From a list that only stigmatises to a list that stigmatises but also secures (some) measures and funds
- Radical might be what is needed?



# Zooming out

- A specific and radical example of housing policy
- An example of giving numbers and targets very concrete and dramatic consequences
- An example of powers shifting:
  - National government taking control from otherwise strong municipalities
  - Less power to resident democracy
  - More power to developers and private rental companies



## Zooming out

Can we, as the Danish politicians seem to expect, socially engineer our cities to reach the official political goal of no ghettos by 2030?

Will the goal of 'no ghettos by 2030' be met? Maybe

Will it lead to changes in the areas? Definitely; major ones

Will it affect the residents of the areas? Definitely – positively and negatively

Will it 'fix' the problem? Unlikely

Will we still have socially deprived areas and socially deprived residents after 2030? Without a doubt



# Points for discussion – among us and in general

Individual and neighbourhood level, main effects and side effects

- What are the consequences of being branded a ghetto? Can the stigma be removed again?
- What will happen to relocated individuals, especially the least resourceful?
- What are the implications for other not-quite-so-deprived areas?
- What will happen to those who would otherwise have moved in but now cannot when the easiest accessible housing market option is closed to them?
  - Rural concentration and/or concentration in poor private rental housing?
  - New types of ghettos?

