

Being Born an Alien in Denmark: Identification of Young People Born in Denmark without Danish Citizenship

Zoé H. Cosnier

Abstract Denmark is home to thousands of young people who were born or raised in the country but do not possess Danish citizenship. Despite growing up in Danish society, attending local schools and speaking the language, many face a long and complex application process to obtain citizenship once they turn 18. The bureaucratic barriers and restrictions related to the naturalisation process affect their legal rights and political participation and, more profoundly, impinge on their identification process. While many of these individuals feel Danish, they remain uncertain about whether Danish society fully accepts them as so. For some, citizenship is merely a means to obtain equal rights, while others feel incomplete without legal recognition. This research brief examines how Danish citizenship regulations and the perception of what it means to be Danish shape young people's self-identification. Through in-depth interviews with individuals born and/or raised in Denmark, the brief sheds light on the lived experiences of people navigating Danish naturalisation process, urging for a re-evaluation of the policies that impact their sense of belonging.

INTRODUCTION

In his speech to the Danish parliament on April 20th, 2024, the Social Democrats' immigration spokesperson, Frederik Vad, stated that "(...) work, education, housing, community club passes, and a clean criminal record are not enough [to be considered integrated] if you also use your position to undermine Danish society from within".¹ His statement reflects a broader narrative that casts suspicion on migrants and their descendants, even those who meet every requirement for citizenship, and they are framed as not fully Danish. As a result, many of those navigating the demanding citizenship application process continue to feel unwelcome, and under scrutiny in their own home country.²

Since the early 2000s, citizenship legislation in Denmark has gradually become stricter, even for those born in the country.³ Despite growing up in Denmark and speaking Danish as native language, 77,000 migrant descendants, as of 2023, are without Danish citizenship.⁴ After turning 18, they

must first apply for a permanent residence permit to be granted a chance to stay in the country.⁵ Once this is obtained, they can apply for Danish citizenship, meeting the same requirements as those who came to Denmark as adults.⁶ Along with passing the citizenship test, one must also show proof of having been in ordinary full-time employment⁷ for three and a half years of the last four, having no debt to public authorities, along with other requirements.⁸ With a processing time of almost two years for citizenship and 13 months for permanent residence permit, migrant descendants must often wait at least until their 21st birthday before being recognized as Danish citizens.⁹ The lack of citizenship excludes migrants and their descendants from political and societal influence. Moreover, being required to apply for citizenship in their home country and going through a long and alienating process affects their sense of belonging. Many feel alienated as a consequence of having to prove their knowledge about and affiliation with the country.¹⁰

This research brief explores how the process of acquiring Danish citizenship shapes the self-understanding of individuals born and/or raised in Denmark, and affects their ability to assert a Danish national identity. While citizenship studies often emphasize legal and political dimensions, this brief offers a fresh perspective by adopting a social-psychological approach.

INTERVIEW STUDY

The research brief is based on fieldwork that took place in March and April 2024.¹¹ A total of 10 in-depth interviews were conducted with individuals

who are born and/or raised in Denmark without Danish citizenship. They all are, aspire to be, or have been in the process of becoming Danish citizens. In other words, the study includes both rejected and approved applicants, and those still awaiting their decision. Furthermore, the brief exclusively includes people without EU citizenship, as this group faces comparable constraints in terms of rights and mobility due to absence of another EU membership.

Four of the participants hold a foreign passport (British, Chinese, Turkish and Ugandan), five only hold a travel document or an alien passport,¹² while one had obtained Danish citizenship a few weeks before our interview. One of the participants holding an alien passport only holds a temporary residence permit. Six participants were born in Denmark while four came to Denmark between ages four and 13. To protect the identities of the participants, all personal information is anonymized and pseudonyms are used.

UNDERSTANDING OF CITIZENSHIP, NATIONAL IDENTITY AND IDENTIFICATION

Being born in a country does not necessarily define one's sense of belonging to that country. Growing up there, speaking the native language and sharing the country's customs and traditions are often seen as important aspects of national identity, though to what extent and to which dimensions remain contested in the scholarly debate.¹³ To contribute to this debate, this research brief examines the effects of naturalisation procedures on identity development by applying theories stemming from social psychology and social identity theory.

The concept of citizenship is defined as the complex relationship between the individual, the state, and the national community. It encompasses several dimensions, such as legal status, rights, responsibilities, and sense of belonging.¹⁴ Citizenship is closely tied to nationhood in the way that states define their citizenry through naturalisation laws.¹⁵ While citizenship can be seen as a means of inclusion and protection, the

selection process risks becoming highly discriminatory, as strict membership requirements tend to favour well-off residents.¹⁶ I apply a broad understanding of citizenship that extends beyond legal and political rights to include cultural and social dimensions, reflecting its role in shaping national identity and a sense of social belonging. Indeed, national identity is associated with, but not limited to, the nation and its national and political institutions. The state plays a significant role in shaping its meaning and defining who belongs, often through ethnic and exclusionary lenses.¹⁷ In this way, citizenship and national identity are deeply intertwined, both reflecting and reinforcing the broader construction of nationhood and national group identity. In many European and Scandinavian countries, however, national identity is often tied to an ethnic understanding of the nation.¹⁸ For non-white residents, this is problematic because it hinders validation of a national belonging among them.

It is thus important to distinguish between people's own understanding of themselves and how they perceive they are categorised by others. Self-identification is used to describe the process by which a person can characterise or situate themselves in a category. This process is both situational and contextual. Moreover, it involves external identification since self-identification also depends on the verification and reflected appraisal of others.¹⁹ Here it is important to make a distinction: self-identification refers to how individuals view themselves, whereas reflected appraisal is the individual's perception of how they are ascribed by others. When self-ascription and ascription by others diverge, individuals may experience a misrecognition of identity.²⁰ One of the most essential agents of external identification and categorisation is the state and its institutions.²¹ When discussing citizenship and national identity, being recognised as a member of the nation by the state is therefore crucial.

In- and outgroup identification are used to define the group of which an individual defines themselves to be a member of or distinguish themselves from,

which does not depend on interaction frequency with members of in- or outgroup. The most essential criterion for ingroup membership is that the individuals define themselves and are defined by others as members.²² Once an individual identifies and belongs with a group, they start comparing the in- and outgroup. This often results in emphasizing the values that put their own group, the in-group, in a positive light, and leads to negative attitudes towards the outgroup – a process that will enhance the individual's self-esteem.²³

IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

To approach the identification process of the interview participants with relation to their sense of national identity through the lens of social psychology, I employ the three-stage model of ethnic identity development.²⁴ The model is originally used to study ethnic identity development in adolescence. In this brief, I use it in relation to national identity development process among those born and/or raised in Denmark without Danish citizenship. According to the model, identity development is divided into three stages: the unexamined ethnic identity which is characterised by no exploration of one's ethnic identity; the moratorium, where the individual encounters a shocking event that disrupts their worldview and drives them to explore their ethnic identity; and the achieved identity. This is the final stage and the ideal outcome of ethnic identity development. In this stage, the individual has achieved a clear sense of their own identity and has developed a way to deal with negative prejudice and stereotypes about their ethnic origin without internalising a negative self-perception.

BEING AN ALIEN IN DENMARK

There are many practical consequences and critical implications related to not having Danish citizenship in Denmark, and many of these have led to experiences of being othered and, for some, subjugated. Most of the people I interviewed mentioned how they first became aware of their status as non-citizens when they had to apply for

citizenship after turning 18 years old. Growing up, citizenship itself did not distinguish them from their friends and peers. It became a concern later on in their lives when they themselves experienced the impacts, for example related to travelling, but more so because they were unable to engage in national elections. This made them feel distinct from their peers.

Due to the strict naturalisation requirements, all interview participants felt restricted and had to make important life-choices based solely on improving their chances of becoming citizens. For the youngest participants, taking a work-and-travel year after their high school graduation, as many young Danes do, was not an option. It could potentially delay their chances of becoming a citizen. Another participant described how waiting for the decision on her citizenship application had made her stay in a job she was unhappy with. Being unemployed or having a part-time job, even for a short period, could jeopardize the results of her application, and she therefore felt immobile and locked. For Samuel, the restrictions and alienation he felt in his everyday life had pushed him to start looking for options outside of the country. If he had had citizenship automatically, he claims that he might have chosen to stay in his hometown and start a family. But the constant feelings of being subjugated because of his immobility and alienation pushed him away from that life.

Travelling was for all the research participants connected to feelings of being othered. The fact that they had to go to the 'All Passports' line and be questioned at arrival to Denmark was perceived by many as being seen as an outsider. For some participants, their passport or travel document was even a source of embarrassment. If migrants and their descendants cannot obtain a passport from their or their parents' country of origin, they are instead given a conventional passport (also called a travel document) or an alien passport (*fremmedpas*). The very name of this document labels them as outsiders. Sevdá, along with several other interviewees, expressed the brutality of carrying such a passport: "Alien is the worst thing you can

get. You're not even anything. You don't even have an identity. It's brutal."

Being excluded from political influence, restricted in their mobility, and even officially labelled as 'aliens' has left many feeling othered, affecting how they see themselves. Several interview participants described how the constant reminder of their non-citizen status, whether through their passport or the limitations placed on their choices, made them internalise the idea of being an outgroup member. These experiences show how structural barriers shape not only their practical options but also their ability to claim a Danish national identity.

THE PERCEPTION OF BEING DANISH

Many of the participants saw Danish citizenship as a gateway to being recognised as Danish. At the same time, they admitted that citizenship alone does not define whether someone can call themselves Danish. Most of the participants self-identify as Danish-mixed, though some are still hesitant to claim their Danishness without formal recognition on paper. Their self-identification as Danish is shaped by their perception of what it means to be Danish, which they often tied to an ethnic understanding, either linked to cultural habits or racial markers. When asked to define Danishness, some mentioned skin colour as something that mattered for being considered Danish. Others pointed to cultural practices when claiming their own Danishness:

"I eat pork, for example, I have a boyfriend, I do all those things that Danish people do. I would say that I'm like any other Dane in society. And that's just without the Danish passport. So, that's just where I forget that I don't have a Danish passport before I get reminded again because there's still these situations."
(Maryam, a young woman in her early 20s, born and raised in Denmark by Afghan parents)

Maryam explained that she feels Danish because of cultural values, saying: "I'm very, very integrated". Her choice of words is striking as she was born in Denmark yet still feels the need to prove her

belonging. This shows how people with migrant backgrounds often internalise the expectation that they must integrate or assimilate to be accepted, even if they have never migrated. Tom, a 19-year-old also born in Denmark, similarly connected his Danishness to cultural practices like eating traditional food and celebrating national holidays, but he questioned this logic asking: "Why does that make me more Danish that I like roast pork, brown gravy, and red cabbage, and celebrate Christmas and Easter?" Together, their reflections reveal a tension: cultural markers are really embedded in dominant definitions of what it means to be Danish. This makes it difficult for those who grow up with different cultural backgrounds to define their own Danish national identity, even if they themselves do not subscribe to these definitions. And when citizenship is missing on top of that, many hesitate to fully claim their Danishness.

For most of the participants, being seen as a Danish citizen by others was not the most important part of feeling Danish. Many explained that people often assumed they already had citizenship and were surprised to learn they did not. This shows a gap between how the participants view themselves and how they believe others see them. While most self-identified as Danish, they remained aware of their ethnic differences compared to ethnic Danes. For Hana, citizenship is acute for her Danish validation. She is often perceived as Danish because of her appearance, but the lack of citizenship leaves her feeling excluded:

"I feel it's the only place my classmates can pick on me. Because in every other aspect I'm just as Danish as everyone else. But the fact is that I can never be truly Danish with an alien's passport. Then I could just say that I'm a Danish citizen, I have it as proof in my hand. But I can't right now when I don't have it."

Nasima feels more conflicted about being seen as a Danish citizen by others. On the one hand, she appreciates when others assume she has Danish citizenship, but at the same time she resents that

they overlook the struggles she faces as a non-citizen.

For Mary, a young woman in her early twenties who came to Denmark at the age of six, citizenship is not about being validated as Danish, but merely about gaining equal rights. Because of her ethnicity she believes that she will never be seen fully as Danish, and this is therefore not her goal. Tom, on the other hand, struggles with low self-esteem tied to his lack of citizenship, which makes him feel unable to fully claim his Danish identity. These perspectives illustrate how differently young people position themselves in relation to citizenship — while for some it is primarily a legal tool to be a part of society, for others it represents belonging, validation, and even self-worth.

LIVING UP TO THE EXPECTATIONS OF BEING DANISH

Many interviewees felt they had to prove themselves and succeed in society in order to be recognised as Danish. For Tom, this pressure was present from a young age. His citizenship status influenced how he saw himself in relation to others, and how he believed he needed to act to be accepted as an ingroup member. Growing up, his parents were very clear about what citizenship meant in terms of possibilities and status, and since they could not obtain it themselves, they urged him to work hard to become a Danish citizen:

"I grew up with parents that told me: 'You need to do well in school, you need to give society a reason to choose you over Danish people because if you have the same qualities as a Danish person, they will always choose them over you.'"

Tom was constantly reminded that he was different from other Danes and felt he had to prove his worth to earn a place in society. From childhood, he pressured himself to excel in school just to be accepted as a co-national. This pressure was not unique to him; several others in my research shared the same story. For them, high grades and academic success became a way to validate their Danishness,

as they felt they had to prove it more than others. They share a common narrative: only when they are successful in society can they move further away from the risk of exclusion, and only then can others see their value and support them. This additional pressure weighing on their shoulders caused stress and uncertainty about their identity. Because, in periods when they lacked the energy to go the extra mile, what was their worth?

A shared experience among the participants is that, even though they reject society's attitudes toward non-citizens, many have internalised these views and started acting according to them. Seeing themselves as outgroup members has created self-doubt and low self-esteem, as they try to prove they are worthy of citizenship. Several expressed frustration that Denmark often frames migrants in terms of skills and value to society, yet they admitted to having partly taken on this same narrative, leaving them conflicted about their own identity. This tension reflects the "moratorium stage" of identity development, where individuals are questioning and exploring their identity but have not yet fully committed to it. And the views that are imposed on them have directly impacted their ability to explore freely, since the identity of being someone who does well is always present.

CONCLUSION AND KEY FINDINGS

Across the perspectives included in this study, citizenship is more than a legal status – it is a key factor in the participants' social belonging and validation. While they do not all expect to be seen as ethnic Danes, they seek recognition as part of Danish society. For many, citizenship is the final step in securing that place. At the same time, the strict citizenship regulations and complex application process place heavy pressure on young people born and/or raised in Denmark without citizenship. Many described stress and low self-esteem tied to this process, alongside the constant reminder that they are not yet fully recognised as members of the national community. Several expressed that they feel they have to work harder than ethnic Danes just to be seen as worthy of Danish citizenship, a

pressure that deepens their stress, self-doubt, and uncertainty about their identity. This undermines their ability to explore and solidify their Danish identity.

On top of this, being officially labelled as an alien, facing restrictions on mobility while navigating a Danish national identity often tied both to cultural and ethnic markers make it even harder for them to define their own national identity, even if they feel Danish in their everyday lives. Having to prove their Danishness through the citizenship application process further increases this gap and keeps them from reaching the final step of identity development.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I would like to thank all the interview participants who shared their time and personal stories with me, and who gave me their trust in interpreting their words.

Author bio *Zoé H. Cosnier finished her master's degree in International Migration and Ethnic Relations from Malmö University in 2024. She was the winner of the MIM master's thesis award 2024. Email: zoecosnier@gmail.com.*

- ¹ Henriksen, M. (2024, April 20). Udlændingedeбат skaber ballade i socialdemokratiet: Beskyldes for at skabe grobund for racisme, DR. <https://www.dr.dk/nyheder/politik/udlaendingedeбат-skaber-ballade-i-socialdemokratiet-beskyldes-skabe-grobund-racisme>
- ² Ibid.
- ³ Ersbøll, E. (2015). *Report on citizenship law: Denmark*. EUDO Citizenship Observatory. Italy: European University Institute. https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/36504/EU_DO_CIT_CR_2015_14_Denmark.pdf
- ⁴ Danish Institute for Human Rights (2023). *Analyse: Historisk mange børn og unge uden dansk statsborgerskab*.
- ⁵ Andersen, L. G., Ersbøll, E., Keller, K., Carøe Munkholm, M., Krusaa, N. M. & Maskell, A. (2021). *Fremmed i eget land?* Copenhagen: Institut for Menneskerettigheder.
- ⁶ Udlændinge- og Integrationsministeriet (n.d.). *Betingelser*. <https://uim.dk/statsborgerskab/udenlandske-statsborgere/betingelser>; Danish Institute for Human Rights (2023).
- ⁷ Applicants must work a minimum of 120 hours per month. Working hours are calculated on a monthly basis and can therefore not be transferred from one month to another. Studying does not count as ordinary employment.
- ⁸ Udlændinge- og Integrationsministeriet (n.d.).
- ⁹ Danish Institute for Human Rights (2023).
- ¹⁰ Andersen et al. (2021).
- ¹¹ Cosnier, G. Z. (2024). *Being born a non-citizen: A qualitative study of citizenship identification in the context of Danish birthright legislation*. MA thesis. Malmö: Malmö University.
- ¹² The passport provided for non-Danish citizens without access to citizenship in their own or their parents' home country.
- ¹³ Smerkovich, M. & Gubbala, S. (2025, January 28). What makes someone 'truly' belong in a country? Views differ

- on language, birthplace, other factors. *Pew Research Center*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2025/01/28/what-makes-someone-truly-belong-in-a-country-views-differ-on-importance-of-language-birthplace-and-other-factors/>
- ¹⁴ Joppke, C. (2010). *Citizenship and Immigration*. Cambridge: Polity Press; Bloemraad, I., Kortweg, A. C. & Yurdakul, G. (2008). Citizenship and immigration: Multiculturalism, assimilation, and challenges to the nation-state. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 34(1), 153–179.
 - ¹⁵ Andreouli, E. & Howarth, C. (2013). National identity, citizenship and immigration: Putting identity in context. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 43(3), 361–382.
 - ¹⁶ Orgad L. (2017). Naturalization. In Shachar, A., Bauböck, R., Bloemraad, I. and Vink, M. (eds.). *The Oxford Handbook of Citizenship* (pp. 337–357). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
 - ¹⁷ Andreouli & Howarth (2013).
 - ¹⁸ Adolfsson, C. (2023). 'It feels made up': Post racialism and colorblind ideology within individual constructions of self identity. *Ethnicities*, 24(6), 899–919.
 - ¹⁹ Brubaker, R. & Cooper, F. (2000). Beyond Identity. *Theory and Society*, 29(1), 1–47.
 - ²⁰ Verkuyten, M. (2018). *The Social Psychology of Ethnic Identity*. New York: Routledge.
 - ²¹ Brubaker & Cooper (2000).
 - ²² Tajfel, H. & Turner, J. (1979). An integrative theory of intergroup conflict. In Austin, W. T. and Worchel, S. (eds.). *The Social Psychology of Inter-Group Relations* (pp. 33–47). Brooks/Cole Publishing.
 - ²³ Stets, J. E. & Burke, P. J. (2000). Identity theory and social identity theory. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 63(3), 224–237; Harwood, J. (2020). Social identity theory. In van den Bulck, J. (ed.), *International Encyclopedia of Media psychology*. Wiley.
 - ²⁴ Phinney, J. S. (1993). Three-stage model of ethnic identity development in adolescence. In Bernal, M. E. and Knight, G. P. (eds.) *Ethnic Identity: Formation and transmission Among Hispanics and Other Minorities* (pp. 61–80). New York: State University of New York Press.