

Review

Freedom of expression in Denmark – a study of opinions of and experiences with freedom of expression among people in Denmark

Background and objectives:

- Established in December 2017 on the basis of a decision by the Government, the Committee on Freedom of Expression decided that they wanted a questionnaire survey of the public opinion of and experiences with freedom of expression.
- The focus of the survey was to examine opinions of and experiences with freedom of expression in different groups of the population.

Research design:

- This report contains analyses of a survey of a representative sample of the Danish population aged 16-74.
- Groups of special interest which include people aged 16-25 as well as immigrants and descendants of immigrants from six countries (selected on the basis of whether the countries were dominated by a Muslim majority or not) were oversampled. The results for these groups were analysed separately.
- The report also contains analyses of dedicated surveys that have been distributed to politicians, people active in public debates, journalists and artists.

Findings:

- Results regarding the population aged 16-74:
 - The surveyed population voiced strong support for freedom of expression.
 - The support for freedom of expression declined if expressions could have consequences, i.e. if they could be hurtful or offensive, could threaten solidarity or national security.
 - The respondents demonstrated knowledge of limitations on freedom of expression. There was also a large degree of consistency between actual limitations and the opinion of the general population of what should be illegal. However, as regards the protection of religious freedom of expression, more people believe that it should be illegal to argue for the introduction of Sharia law (62 per cent) than people who think that it should be illegal to criticise Islam (18 per cent).
 - The population demonstrates a large degree of tolerance towards the freedom of expression of minority groups. Exceptions to this are ‘neo-Nazis’ and ‘Muslim fundamentalists who argue for the introduction of Sharia law in Denmark’ whom the population do not afford the same freedom of expression as other groups.
 - Large parts of the population agree that people have the opportunity to participate in the public debate on social media and in traditional media. 42 per cent say that they have participated in the public debate on social media in the past six months while the corresponding figure for traditional media is 23 per cent. A similar number of people indicate that they have avoided the public debate on these platforms even though they wanted to participate. 70 per cent of all respondents agree that some things make people avoid participating in the public debate in social and traditional media.
 - 61 per cent say that they have encountered stories on social media which were not true. 44 per cent worry about this. The corresponding figures for the traditional media are 58 per cent and 29 per cent, respectively.

- More public employees (29 per cent) than private employees (13 per cent) have experienced problems at their workplace which they think that the public ought to know about. The surveyed population also voiced a larger degree of support for public employees than for private employees who express themselves publicly about problems at their workplace.
- Generally, the opinions of and experiences with the freedom of expression of young people aged 16-25 do not differ from those of the general population aged 16-74. When opinions and experiences do differ, young people tend to be less restrictive than the population at large.
- Immigrants and descendants of immigrants from Muslim majority countries are generally more restrictive when it comes to freedom of expression than the general population aged 16-74. The group values freedom of expression highly but significantly less so than the general population. This group's support for freedom of expression is also lower than the support of the general population when expressions could have societal consequences. Finally, the results of the group differ from the results of the general population as regards questions about immigrants, descendants of immigrants, Muslims and Islam.
- Immigrants and descendants of immigrants from other (non-Muslim majority) countries have opinions of and experiences with freedom of expression that are quite similar to those of the general population. In some cases, their results are more similar to those of immigrants and descendants of immigrants from Muslim majority countries. This is especially pronounced when it comes to opinions that can make people avoid the public debate in social and traditional media as well as avoiding these debates themselves.
- Politicians, people active in public debates, journalists and artists are generally the least restrictive groups surveyed about freedom of expression. The four groups value freedom of expression higher than does the general population, including if the expressions could have consequences. A larger share of these groups than of the general population participates in public debates, but a larger share of the groups also agrees that they have avoided debates during the past six months, even though they did want to participate.
- Men and women generally do not have different opinions of and experiences with freedom of expression. When they do, women tend to be more restrictive than men.
- People's opinions of and experiences with freedom of expression tend to be linked to their educational level. People whose highest level of completed education is general upper secondary education (such as the Danish 'gymnasiet') or long-cycle higher education (master's degree or higher) – and to some extent also people with medium-cycle higher education (bachelor's degrees and similar) – tend to be less restrictive than people whose highest educational level is either below secondary school or vocational upper secondary education. The tendencies are, however, neither unequivocal nor consistent throughout the analyses.
- Generally, there is no relationship between people's income level and their opinions of and experiences with freedom of expression. When differences across income levels do occur, people from the first and second income quartiles tend to be less restrictive than people from the fourth income quartile.