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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The Anti-Restrictions Movement and the Populist Counterpublics in Denmark

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### ABSTRACT:

Despite less restrictive governmental Covid-19 measures than in other European countries, Denmark also witnessed the rise of mobilisations against vaccine measures and corona-related restrictions. While most protests did not assemble many participants, nor garnered much media attention, the anti-restrictions scene consists of a vast and diverse array of activists and organisations united in the call for less governmental intervention in the freedoms of the citizens, as also witnessed elsewhere across the globe. We conceptualise the anti-restrictions groups as 'populist counterpublics', since the counterdiscourses emerging from the Covid-19 measures deepen the antagonist divide between the ordinary people and the elites. We focus on three of the most prominent groups: *Men in Black* (MIB), the *Freedom Movement's Joint Council* (FBF), and *Earth Freedom Knowledge 21* (JFK21). By analysing arenas and frames, we show how the Danish anti-restrictions movement uses the diagnostic frames of *totalitarian government* and *global complot* to blame the Danish government and international elites, and the prognostic frames of *power and rights to the people* and *individual freedom* as solutions to the articulated problems. Although these groups employed similar frames and enemy constructions, they failed in promoting internal alliances and in shaping a new and accepted idea of who makes up 'the people', leading to a limited level of public support for their cause.

### KEYWORDS:

Anti-restrictions, collective action, counterpublics, Covid-19, populism, Denmark

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## 1. Introduction

On December 9, 2021, Danish prime minister Mette Frederiksen was questioned in Court regarding her role in the mink case. It was later found that she did not have the required legal authority to cull the Danish mink population on farms placed outside of the contagion zones. Around 150 protesters had assembled outside the Court. This group was very diverse, both in terms of issue focus and left-right placement, spanning mink farmers, protest group activists, vaccine-hesitant/refusers, and supporters of the citizens' initiative 'Mette Frederiksen on trial now'. While some expressed their scepticism regarding the vaccines, others instead accused the government of increasing authoritarian control.

This anti-government protest hardly represented the sentiments of the Danish population. Throughout the pandemic, the Danes continuously expressed comparably high trust in the strategies and recommendations of the national government and health authorities (Hassing Nielsen and Lindvall 2021; Eurofound 2021). Moreover, Denmark is the fourth highest-ranking European country in terms of administered vaccine doses (as of June 2022: Statista 2022) with 82.1% of the population fully vaccinated. Despite criticism of the government, all Danish political parties supported vaccinations, and among the voters only two parties' voters significantly opposed the vaccines, namely the right-wing parties New Right (Nye Borgerlige) (21% opposing vaccines) and Liberal Alliance (15%) (Kjørgx Bohr 2021). While New Right supporters are generally anti-system, the Liberal Alliance voters are strong defenders of individual freedom. Yet, no Danish party channelled the concerns and demands of the vaccine sceptics, which instead were derogatorily labelled 'sølvpapirshatte' (tin foil hats). We argue that the generally positive reception of the Danish health crisis management entailed that the emerging anti-restrictions movement was largely ignored and/or dismissed by the political mainstream. This in turn enabled the anti-restrictions movement to reframe itself as a populist counterpublic, united in the dismissal of the 'totalitarian' and 'collaborationist' elites.

While such anti-restrictions mobilisation is far from only witnessed in Denmark (della Porta 2022), the country's low death rates and the government's comparably less restrictive Covid-19 measures and professional communication strategy meant that most Danes did not face strong health- or finance-related hardships during the pandemic (Krastev and Leonard 2021). These factors make the Danish anti-restrictions counterpublic an interesting case for closer scrutiny. The anti-restrictions movement is highly heterogeneous, and no group gathered many participants – except for a few more disruptive actions – nor did it garner much media attention. The interest in the Danish case does not relate to its size or scope, but rather to understanding how numerous counterpublics emerged to express a broader call for less governmental intervention in citizens' freedoms, and to adopt an anti-elite discourse, and not just a rejection of (forced) Covid-19 vaccines.

Relying on counter-expert opinions, conspiratorial messages, and personal stories from people negatively affected by the vaccines, the anti-restrictions movement's frames heavily focus on a systemic critique, primarily targeted at the domestic decision-makers and medical authorities, but also at international organisations (especially WHO) and actors (like Bill Gates). Anti-establishment has thus become a uniting frame for the Danish mobilisation, intertwined with criticism of the Social Democrat government's centralisation of power, and political scandals related to the corona measures, such as the mink case. Thus, we consider the Danish anti-restrictions movement (1) populist, as by disassociating themselves from a placement on the left-right axis, its members are mainly opposed to the (inter)national political and medical establishment; and (2) *counterpublics*, since populism is developed distantly from mainstream politics to express and organise dissent against national and transnational elites.

The importance of the case of Denmark lies in how the opposition to restrictions and vaccines is framed as a rejection of the social democratic model, which is accused of introducing authoritarian public health

measures, and of focusing on *community* care to the detriment of individual freedoms. Our objective is to explore: *How do Danish anti-restrictions groups contribute to developing populist counterpublics, fostering 'popular' demands, and expressing their opposition to the elites?* More specifically, this main research question is unfolded in the following sub-questions:

- What are the main arenas used by the Danish anti-restrictions groups to disseminate their ideas and claims?
- What are the main frames used by the anti-restrictions groups to accentuate the antagonism between 'the ordinary people' and the elites?
- How does the anti-establishment discourse of the anti-restrictions groups respond to the policies and values of the Danish welfare state and society?

By answering these questions, we contribute to the populism literature by showing how populism adopts an extra-parliamentary form. Moreover, the study also adds to studies of the mobilisation against the Covid-19 restrictions. Firstly, we analyse the movement as a reaction against the welfare state, which allows for the appellation to freedom and anti-authoritarianism as main values. Secondly, we add knowledge about the anti-restrictions movement in Denmark, a case that so far has not received much scholarly attention, despite its different institutional context and Covid-19 response compared to most other European countries.

To address these questions, we present the conceptualisation of 'populist counterpublics'. Next, in the methods section, we outline our selection of embedded cases and data, and explain our frame analytical approach. To analyse the Danish case, we focus on three of the most vociferous and protest-active Danish organisations as embedded cases, used for illustrative purposes to explore the overall movements' populist features. These are: *Men in Black, Denmark* (MIB), the *Freedom Movement's Joint Council* (*Frihedsbevægelsens Fællesråd, FBF*), and *Earth Freedom Knowledge 21* (*Jorden Frihed Kundskab, JFK21*). Finally, we conclude by reflecting on how the Danish groups have had limited success in criticising the welfare system as opposed to individual freedoms.

## 1.1 Conceptual Framework: Populist Counterpublics and the Pandemic

The pandemic has increased academic studies, news articles, and public interventions which scrutinise the reactions against Covid-19 restrictions as populist (see e.g. Katsambekis and Stavrakakis 2020; Ringe and Rennó 2022). Rather than focusing on political parties or individual attitudes, our approach instead addresses the formation of (online) extra-parliamentary counterpublics as manifestations of populism against the economic, political, and media elites.

As Ralph Schroeder (2018) mentions, the strength of populism must be understood by taking into account how populist movements utilise technologies to become counterpublics. As a critique of the idealised role attributed to the bourgeois public in the maintenance of democratic societies (Jackson and Foucault Welles 2015), the idea of 'counterpublics' emerged from the conceptualisation of the public sphere as a site for political struggle and conflict (Karppinen 2009). When Nancy Fraser introduced the notion, she referred mainly to 'subaltern counterpublics' as "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs" (Fraser 1992: 123). Counterpublics are 'subaltern' due to the nature of the groups that produce counterpublics; 'counter' because they entail an oppositional function; and 'publics' since these arenas have a publicist orientation, so they cannot be reduced to enclaves.

Michael Warner (2002) highlights that Fraser's definition suggests "the constitution of a public as a multicontextual space of circulation, organized not by a place or an institution but by the circulation of discourse" (Warner 2002: 85). 'Counterpublics' is associated with marginalised and excluded groups that obtain more visibility and voice and consequently contribute to more plural, reflexive, and critical public spheres. Yet, to truly understand current expressions of counterpublics, two further points must be considered: the importance of digital media in shaping counterpublics, and their adoption of a populist articulation of counterdiscourses.

Lincoln Dahlberg (2011: 860-863) points to the importance of counterpublics in extending democracy through digital media. He highlights that the counterpublics position considers digital communication technologies to be enabling counterdiscourses, as well as linking other excluded voices to contest the discursive boundaries of the mainstream public sphere. According to Dahlberg, this implies two assumptions on democracy: first, social formations entail inclusion/exclusion relations and discursive contestation, and second, the formation of counterpublics relies on such an antagonistic situation. Counterdiscourses are developed in critical arenas so they can contest dominant discourses, including the boundaries of what is legitimate public sphere communication.

Barbara Pfetsch (2018) is quite cautious about the democratic potential of digital democracy. She singles out that the emergence of counterpublics is usually understood in the context of the normative goal of deliberation and consensus. This means that forms of disrupted political communication which are neither deliberation- nor consensus-seeking are becoming more normal, primarily driven by the internet. Therefore, Pfetsch questions that the cyber transformation of the public sphere leads to increased plurality, and warns about the tendency towards filter bubbles and tribal communication. Online and offline dissonant public spheres, she concludes, can move towards the inclusion of demands and counterpublics or shift into populism.

In this sense, counterpublics may involve opposed developments: they can enrich the plurality of the existing public sphere, or they can lead to its fragmentation and polarisation. By associating them with populism, there is a tendency to see the second option as the most feasible. We consider that two dimensions are important when addressing 'populist counterpublics': the oppositional identities that adopt the antagonist form 'people vs. elites', and the oppositional knowledges to legitimate political understandings different from the ones expressed in the dominant knowledge sources.

There are two main reasons for the emergence of populist counterpublics that rely on social media: 1) the antagonistic sphere of the Web 2.0 suits the dichotomisation of politics (Moffit 2016), and 2) social media give ordinary people a platform to express themselves and denounce the 'pro-establishment bias' of mainstream media (Gerbaudo 2018). This does not infer that the architecture of online platforms is inherently populist, but rather that it can facilitate populist counterpublics (Hatakka 2019). Through populist counterpublics, the discourse of the 'virtuous people' against the 'corrupt elite' (Müller 2016) gains more strength in its opposition to 'official' media and in including 'ordinary people' in the process of discursive formation.

Another significant element of counterpublics is that they explicitly challenge the 'dominant knowledge' inherent to the mainstream public sphere (Jackson and Foucault Welles 2015). It is not surprising, then, that populism has converged to some extent with conspiracy theories, sharing their anti-elite sentiment and mistrust of experts and mainstream media (Bergmann 2018). Similar to populism, conspiracy theories, which as counter-truths cannot be verified (Bergmann 2018), demonise and delegitimise the conspiring elite (Pirro and Taggart 2022).

Although 'counterpublics' have traditionally been associated with progressive movements, 'populist counterpublics' tend to predominantly refer to right-wing movements. We consider that populist counterpublics can be plural or anti-plural, progressive or reactionary. However, the emergence of groups and discourses as reactions against Covid-19 measures has strengthened the emphasis on right-wing dimensions of

populism between ‘ordinary people’ and ‘corrupt elites’ (Žuk and Žuk 2020), and the connection between populist attitudes and vaccine hesitancy (Kennedy 2019; Recio-Román, Recio-Menéndez, and Román-González 2021).

All in all, by populist counterpublics we refer to online (combinable with offline) group formations that produce discursively different representations of ‘the ordinary people’ as contestations to the dominant elites. Besides claiming the legitimacy of their demands, counterpublics question the legitimacy of knowledge and information produced in the public sphere. Specifically, we focus on the frames deployed to strengthen the populist divide between the people and the elites, as well as between legitimate and illegitimate claims and knowledge. Thus, the problems (diagnoses) attributed to the elite by the Danish anti-restrictions movement can only be solved (prognoses) by giving power to the people.

## 2. Methodology, Case Selection, and Data

Setting out to explore the populist nature of the Danish mobilisation against Covid-19 restrictions and vaccinations in the period 2020 to 2022, the analysis uses three pre-selected protest groups for illustrative purposes (see Table 1). They have been selected based on their size, online and street-based activity levels, transversal membership groups, and relevance within the Danish anti-restrictions mobilisation (Lehmann et al. 2021). They involve *Men in Black, Denmark* (MIB), the *Freedom Movement's Joint Council* (FBF), and *Earth Freedom Knowledge 21* (JFK21).

**Table 1 - Overview of JFK21, MIB, and FBF’s organisation type, founding date, social media followers, and protest actions 2020-2022**

Group	Type of organisation	Founding Date	Facebook Followers	Telegram	Protests
JFK21	Party (not eligible)	Autumn 2016	10,900 (2020)	1,128 (Feb 2022)	58
FBF	Political association	Sept 28, 2020	16,800 (Feb 2022) 26,000 (Jan 17, 2021)	557 (Feb 2022) (hardly any posts)	26
MIB	Protest group	Nov 15, 2020	17,300 (Feb 2022) 15,000 (Jan 2020) 31,700 (Feb 2022)	1,005 (Feb 2022)	17

**Source:** Information obtained from the websites and social media pages of the analysed groups.

JFK21 is one of the initial and most active protest organisers against the Danish government’s corona-related measures. The party was founded by, and is centred around, its current leader, Mads Palsvig, a previous international investment banker. FBF was established in September 2020 as an umbrella association for several smaller groups objecting to the Danish government’s corona measures. It currently consists of numerous local groups across Denmark. Finally, MIB entered the Danish protest scene in November 2020, and draws strong inspiration from the football hooligan milieu. Several MIB-inspired local sub-groups have also been established, e.g. *Resistance Middle Jutland (Modstand Midtjylland)*. The three groups differ highly regarding their protest repertoires and organisational goals, but unite in their dismissal of the government’s corona strategy.

We employ frame analysis to investigate the groups' use of populist discourse by focusing on the leadership communication (meta-level analysis). Frame analysis is a discursive approach that enables the exploration of actors' grievances, identities, and antagonist constructions in their interactions. We consider framing a "conscious and intentional selection of language and concepts to influence political debate and decision-making" (Bacchi 2009: 39). Using Snow and Benford's (1988) approach to studying collective action frames, we analyse the groups' prognostic and diagnostic frames, with a focus on their (perceived) problem identifications and blame contributions. Moreover, to unravel the groups' self-perception and references to 'the people', we also analyse their collective identity frames (Benford and Snow 2000), i.e., their constructions of who 'we' are (ingroups) and who 'we' are not (antagonist outgroups, focused on the elites). The frame analysis thus permits an account of how the divide between 'the people' and the elite is produced within the specific Danish political and societal context.

We use protest event analysis (PEA) to explore the groups' use of the protest arena, focusing on the mobilisation frequency, tactics, and issues over time (Hutter 2014). In this study, 'protest events' consist of "messages directed to political adversaries, sympathisers, decision makers, and the wider public", which either contain demands, appeals, or threats towards these actors (Ibid.: 231). A PEA consists of a systematic qualitative data collection, which is coded using a formalised codebook, established based on pre-defined schematic properties (Koopmans and Rucht 2002). Here, the schematic properties consist of the protest event's initiating actor, location, protest form (conventional, demonstrative, or violent), main issue(s), and target(s). Unlike most PEAs (Hutter 2014), this study's dataset predominantly draws on the groups' own sources, in the form of activist-based internet data (Almeida and Lichbach 2003). This choice provides more elaborate first-hand information about the protest rationale, and usually includes a larger amount of actions (Ibid.).

Wanting to explore the three groups as digital counterpublics, we manually scraped data from their websites and social media accounts. While Facebook is by far the most used social media platform for all three groups, we are not permitted to scrape its contents, leaving us to explore other platforms. This limitation of course affects the representativeness of the analytical results, as we cannot analyse all the organisations' statements and actions. Yet, an assessment of the groups' communication style and extent on other social media pages led us to identify Telegram as the most fitting social media page for MIB (@MENINBLACKDENMARK) and FBF (@fbfnyt) in terms of our research objectives, and Twitter for JFK21 (@JFK21\_Partii). The use of Twitter for JFK21 is explainable by the party's limited use of Telegram for organisational and mobilisation purposes, whereas the party used Twitter to link to its online newsletters. We solely scraped the groups' own posts, i.e., there was no inclusion of user comments. To ensure as full a dataset as possible, we combined this collection with a media search for the two-year period, using Lexis-Nexis, inserting the groups' names in the search function. As no articles were retrieved for JFK21, we supplemented the Lexis-Nexis data with a looser Google search. We also included protest accounts from the alternative media *Folketsmedie.dk*, which was established during the pandemic (in 2021) as part of the anti-restrictions movement. Besides from protest information, the newspaper inclusion also provided more background on the Covid-19 context, the protest groups and leaders, and their more specific mobilisation motivations. The recent nature of the anti-restrictions mobilisation entails that we rely rather strongly on newspaper articles in our reference list, as academic literature still is in its infancy regarding the Danish case.

For the frame analysis, we collected posts and website entries containing the groups' views on the political handling of the Covid-19 pandemic (excluding video blogs). For JFK21 and FBF, the analysed data was mainly obtained through their websites and included 'About us' sections, open letters to various political actors, and campaign information, while for MIB, we had to predominantly rely on its social media posts and newspaper articles about the group, due to the limited information on its website. The data was collected and manually coded in NVivo, focusing on the groups' statements about themselves, 'the people', and 'the elites', drawing



both on the established populism literature and the groups' own focus points and key agitation issues, thereby remaining open to alternative diagnoses and prognoses. For the PEA, we gathered entries containing information about (upcoming or past) protests or activities (excluding general meetings and smaller protest actions, like flyering or voter declaration collections), leading us to identify 101 protest events for the three groups. All the Danish statements used in the quotes were translated into English by the authors.

### **3. The Danish Context: Welfare State, Low Restrictions, and Engaging Community Sentiment**

Since June 2019 and throughout the period when Covid-19 was considered a 'societally critical disease' ('samfundskritisk sygdom') (March 2020 to February 1, 2022: Nationalt Kommunikationspartnerskab 2022), Denmark has been led by a Social Democrat government. After an initial limited response to the announcements of the first European Covid-19 cases in March 2020, the Danish government started out by quickly amending the so-called 'Epidemics Law'. Among other aspects, the law permitted the government to introduce assembly bans, forced treatment of Covid-19, and forced vaccinations to inhibit the spread of the virus, leading to rallies by several anti-restrictions groups and activists. As a next step, the government drastically changed the Danish testing and tracking strategy on April 21, 2020. Introducing one of the most elaborate and expensive strategies in Europe, numerous test centres were created, and Danes were encouraged to get tested by any sign of the virus. Starting on December 27, 2020, Denmark then became amongst the first countries to start rolling out the vaccine program, beginning with the elder segment of the population, plus vulnerable citizens. The state very quickly acquired sufficient vaccines for the whole population, and the program saw high public support (82.1% Danes were fully vaccinated by June 2022: Statista 2022).

From the beginning of the pandemic, prime minister Mette Frederiksen found a synthesis to the dilemma presented by the individual isolation at home and the sense of collective, stating that people should stay "Together by keeping apart". Frederiksen promoted a new vocabulary to connect the uncertainty emerging from the coronavirus with the safety offered by the Danish community. This can be seen in the multiple references to 'samfundssind', a compound noun of 'samfund' (society) and 'sind' (mind). The term was coined at the outbreak of World War II and revived by Frederiksen at a press conference on March 11, 2020. It is a call for solidarity resting on "two main pillars: collective responsibility and community spirit" (Marianne Rathje in Johanson 2020). As Rathje notes, 'samfundssind' unifies social and economic responsibility, protecting both the vulnerable and the health care system from saturation, while highlighting the importance of maintaining the Danish welfare state.

During the first months of the pandemic, the Social Democrat crisis management consisted of the three main domestic health authorities: the Ministry of Health (led by minister Magnus Heunicke), the Danish Health Authority (led by director Søren Brostrøm), and SSI (Statens Serum Institut). The three institutions oversaw the announcement and implementation of new measures throughout the epidemic, usually in the form of live-streamed press conferences led by the prime minister. Together with these institutions, the society at large was attributed the role as co-responsible actor to overcome the pandemic through people's demonstration of 'samfundssind' and abidance by the Covid-19 legislation and measures. Moreover, two important political pillars were used to combine the state and citizens' mutual responsibility. Firstly, the importance of the 'welfare society', as pointed out by Frederiksen, since the care provided by the welfare state should be complemented by individuals acting responsibly and for the good of the community. Secondly, the changing meaning of security, which became part of everyday life and blurred the boundary between the state and the individual (Villumsen Berling et al. 2021). Finally, the Danish characteristics of emphasising the benefits of



the welfare state, historically funded by former generations, and the responsibility of citizens contributed to reinforcing a form of everyday nationalism. The solution to the corona crisis was intertwined with the national community and a sense among citizens that solidarity was the major societal value, and that being a Dane was something unique and good (Villadsen 2021).

At the start of the pandemic, the prime minister did not only consolidate her leadership, but notably increased her approval rates. In April 2020, 81% of the Danes thought that Frederiksen's management of the crisis was 'good' or 'very good'. Yet, due to various political crises, most significantly the November 2020 mink scandal, plus more general 'pandemic fatigue' and experiences of high economic and mental costs (Bor, Jørgensen and Bang Pedersen 2021), this strong support decreased gradually, while the prime minister's credibility was increasingly questioned (Schmidt Møller 2021). Although this evolution is comparable with other countries, it must be stressed that Denmark removed the last of its obligatory face mask restrictions in August 2021, and became the first European country to lift all restrictions related to Covid-19 in February 2022. Nevertheless, despite the less restrictive rules and measures introduced during the Covid-19 pandemic, a relatively small segment of the Danish population has expressed strong criticism of the authorities' decision-making throughout, some even questioning the actual existence of the virus.

Facing a Danish majority that supported the government, and only mobilising small numbers of people for their collective action, the Danish anti-restrictions movement has predominantly mobilised online. Except for a few incidents (mainly during MIB rallies), their street protests have been non-violent, and there have not been similar upheavals as in e.g. the Netherlands and Germany. Like elsewhere, besides (sporadic and failed) attempts at joining forces and form one large anti-restrictions coalition, most collaboration has involved protest speaker exchanges. As the following analysis will demonstrate, this relates to their adverse constructions of counterpublic spaces and frames.

#### 4. The Danish Populist Anti-Restrictions Counterpublic

Analysing the anti-restrictions groups as populist counterpublics, we show how the populist articulation divide between the people and the elite is produced and reproduced in online and offline arenas, and through diagnostic and prognostic frames that attribute the problems and the solutions to the elite and to the people, respectively. Table 2 summarises the structure of the analysis, as well as the main frames used by the populist counterpublics.

**Table 2 - Populist counterpublics in Denmark: Arenas and frames**

<i>Populist Articulation</i>	<i>The Establishment</i>	<i>The People</i>
Arenas	Media and political influence	Online organization, offline/street protests
Frames	Diagnosis 1: Totalitarian government	Prognosis 1: Individual freedom
	Diagnosis 2: Global complot	Prognosis 2: Power and rights to the people

##### 4.1. Arenas: Spaces for Dissemination of Alternative Information

We can distinguish two types of arenas, depending on the *space*: online (from websites to social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Telegram) and offline (street protests); and their *function*: promoting internal organisation and identity (the ordinary people) or aiming to create interaction with other publics (elites and people who do not share their views).

### *Online platforms and media presence*

In order to rectify the perceived lack of reliable sources, the anti-restrictions groups have set up their own alternative online platforms, making particularly strong use of their accounts on social media. JFK21's leader has his own YouTube channel, and just like the leader of FBF, he posts vlogs on the group's social media pages with reflections about the corona measures. Besides the social media use, FBF also has its own alternative media platform, *DISSENSmedia – Respectful disagreement (DissensMEDIA – respektfuld uenighed)*. Stating that it is a “politically independent association, which is democratic and fact-based” (FBF 2021a), the media page aims to provide the (alternative) information that it itself finds reliable (FBF n.d.b.), for instance through interviews with corona-sceptical experts.

On their online platforms, both JFK21 and FBF emphasise the distribution of alternative (news) sources and information to their followers and members. FBF carries out “public information (*folkeoplysning*), training, publication and communication work, courses, seminars, and meetings” (FBF 2021a), while JFK21 has organised several information campaigns, courses, and seminars related to Covid-19. In these alternative sources, and for their protest speeches, the groups make use of talks and statements by corona-sceptical experts, for instance a Danish chief physician in immunology (Kim Varming), but also members of the International Doctors Alliance and similar organisations. Throughout the pandemic, both groups have disseminated flyers and advertisements containing (mis)information about the virus. Due to their factually questionable contents, some publishers and citizens have refused to either print or receive the documents, leading both groups to condemn these actions as matters of censorship.

Unlike JFK21 and FBF, none of the inaugural MIB members wish to have a strong media presence, and the group neither has an assigned leader or official spokesperson, nor produces its own and/or spreads Covid-19-related (alternative) information. The group predominantly communicates with its followers through Facebook, and its social media pages are primarily used to spread the movement's core messages (in text form), construct a collective identity around the anti-authoritarian cause, and disseminate information about upcoming protest actions. Yet, its members wish to remain anonymous. Referring to itself as a ‘black-clad resistance’ (*sortklædt modstand*), the group's logo depicts three hooded figures behind the ‘MIB’ inscription, with wings of freedom on both sides and an eagle underneath. During protests, the participants frequently wear black hoodies and cover their faces with fabric (not face masks), both to hide their identities and to symbolise unity.

Besides from their own channels, all three groups have participated in the World Wide Freedom Rallies “dedicated to emboldening citizens to push back against Coronavirus related Restrictions in their countries” (Worldwide Demonstration, n.d.). In addition, JFK21 has organised several solidarity protests with protest groups abroad. One example was a rally on August 29, 2020, which coincided with a demonstration in Berlin that led to an attempted storming of the Reichstag.

### *Street protests and influence on decision-makers*

Throughout the pandemic, all three groups have organised several either more peaceful (JFK21 and FBF) or rowdy (MIB) demonstrations. Table 3 shows that MIB predominantly has carried out demonstrative protests, like marches and street demonstrations, while JFK21 and FBF both make use of demonstrative and more conventional tactics, including open letters and legal prosecutions. Despite their relatively peaceful nature, JFK21 and FBF's rallies have also attracted some media attention.

**Table 3 - Overview of FBF, JFK21 and MIB’s protest forms in the period 2020-2022**

<i>Group</i>	<i>Conventional</i>	<i>Demonstrative</i>	<i>Violent</i>	<i>Total</i>
FBF	61.5 (16)	34.6 (9)	3.8 (1)	100.0 (26)
JFK21	17.2 (10)	82.8 (48)	0.0 (0)	100.0 (58)
MIB	0.0 (0)	100.0 (17)	0.0 (0)	100.0 (17)
Total	25.7 (26)	73.3 (74)	1.0 (1)	100.0 (101)

**Note:** (N: 101). Pct (No. of protests).

FBF and JFK21 have mainly organised more ‘traditional’, peaceful, and family-friendly rallies. In March-May 2021, FBF received considerable media criticism for its successive attempts at hosting ‘reopening parties’ in a public square, the first during a lockdown. Drawing on the *cacerolazo* protest form, JFK21 has organised numerous so-called ‘klinky-klonky’ rallies, consisting of banging drums, pans, and pots. In November 2020, the group participated in a week-long protest camp against the Epidemics Law in front of the Danish Parliament.

Oppositely, MIB has aimed for more media attention-grabbing actions. Mainly organising its protests in the evenings, protesters carried the Danish flag ‘Dannebrog’, banners with slogans, or lit torches while marching through the streets, shouting and singing loudly. Advocating for violent means if necessary, within no time, MIB became known for its rather disorderly and violent protest form, including the throwing of fireworks and beer cans at the police. The protest violence peaked in January 2021. At one protest, on January 23, an effigy of Mette Frederiksen wearing a sign with the words “She must be put to death” around its neck (in reference to the Danish mink case) was even burned in the proximity of an MIB protest. Responding to the bad publicity ensuing from these disruptive actions, the group made an (attempted) image re-branding, intending to attract families to its protests and telling its members not to cause havoc, a strategy that largely worked.

While MIB activists have employed violence during the street protests, this has not been the case for the other two groups, despite their use of numerous war frames. Instead, FBF has had a particularly strong focus on the legal side of the Covid-19 restrictions. Since November 2021, its ‘judicial team’ has published an ‘attention letter’ on the FBF website, informing about the effects of legislative changes. This judicial focus is also visible in its conventional protests, whereof several involve professionally communicated letters to the authorities or other actors that execute the government’s policies (such as school principals, etc.). Many of these letters involve ‘Notifications of personal responsibility’, which the group refers to as a ‘push-back’ tactic, “pushing the responsibility back to those behind the scenes who control the deadly process to which the Danes are currently exposed” (FBF 2020a), in this way targeting the elites.

Using a somewhat similar tactic, JFK21 has also sent emails to decision-makers, including EU representatives, arguing that it “should be made clear that obeying orders does not hold up in court” and bombarding them with “facts, evidence, science and investigations” to encourage them to “break out, become whistle-blowers” (JFK21 2021b). Moreover, the party hosts weekly meetings where the members “plan the actions and send liability notifications to those who need to be informed that they may be in breach of both national and international law” (JFK21 2021a). Both JFK21 and FBF have called for taking the (inter)national decision-makers to court for breeches of the Nuremberg Conventions.

## 4.2 Framing the people vs. the elite

The three explored anti-restrictions groups’ frames mainly take the form of an anti-systemic critique. Questioning the science and arguments behind the categorisation of Covid-19 as a ‘societally critical disease’,

the groups' main diagnosis is an objection to the (perceived) disproportionate measures against an apparently non-dangerous and non-lethal disease, and the therefrom ensuing deprivation of the general population's pre-existing liberties (such as removal of personal freedoms and/or infringements of human rights).

The 'forced' or 'compulsory' Covid-19 measures, such as lockdowns and vaccines, are thus framed as part of a new authoritarian regime which revolves around the authorities' quest for control, blameable on the Danish government, health authorities, and media, plus the international pharmaceutical companies and WHO (see e.g. JFK 2021b). Hence, as Lehmann explains, at the core, the anti-restrictions movement argues "that the Danish model of democracy has been corrupted and that politics has moved away from the people. There is, so to speak, a real system-critical nerve in the movements" (as cited in Thorsen and Türker 2021).

The main prognoses are visible in protest slogans like "More freedom, less control" and "Freedom from coercion" and involve demands for the return of the individual citizens' rights and freedoms against a (perceived) authoritarian and repressive state, together with the return of power to the people, in opposition to the self-interest of the corrupt government and economic and international elites. The (constructed) counterpublics then become spaces to recover these individual freedoms and rights. In the following, we present the two main diagnostic frames associated with the elites (state totalitarianism and global complot) and the main prognostic frames linked to the people (individual freedom and power to the people).

### *Diagnosis of the national problem: State totalitarianism*

MIB's initial marches against the government were announced as 'Funeral processions' for freedom. The strong anti-elite and power-critical sentiments are not solely based on the government's current response to the Covid-19 pandemic, but rather the allegedly long history of state surveillance and control of the population. Deploring the "politicians' fear-based agenda" (Telegram 11.9.2021) and "power arrogance" (Telegram 4.11.2021), the group thus objects to "the rising totalitarianism that has crept into our society, sheltered by the Corona crisis" (Telegram 31.12.2021).

The other two groups argue this anti-authoritarianism in much stronger terms, adopting a war discourse against the government and other elites. Referring to themselves as freedom fighters, FBF implies that Denmark is occupied and that necessary action should be taken, stating that "the fight against the state cannot be peaceful" (Sønderup 2021). Moreover, the group also argues that the new legislative measures "almost resemble Germany during World War II" (Elkær 2020) and that the "media propaganda and methods (...) resemble those of the Nazis" (FBF 2020a). Together with JFK21 and other anti-restrictions organisations, FBF distributed a flyer with the title 'Oprob' ('Call'), mimicking the misspelled flyer that the Nazis dropped on Denmark when it occupied the country in 1940, likening the Danish government's measures with those of an occupying power (Hoffmann-Hansen 2021).

JFK21 shares the emphasis on freedom and the bellicose tone against the elites. As expressed by a sympathiser: "There is a war between the elite and the people, and if you are angry and upset it is because you are being attacked every single day" (Lenesgalleri, n.d.). Mainly emphasising the objection to the Epidemics Law, the mask mandate, and the (forced) vaccinations, JFK21 likens the newly-introduced judicial measures to a 'Bolshevik dictatorship' where people have to submit to, and follow the orders of, the health authorities. The party also compares the corona passport with Hitler's *Gesundheitspass* (Telegram 20.11.2021), and it has organised a protest titled "Freedom or Fascism." Similarly, FBF makes several references to the government's 'totalitarian' policies on both its website and social media pages, particularly in relation to the removal of the Danes' human rights. Objecting to the fact that the Danish government implemented the corona measures "contrary to the recommendations of the health authorities" (FBF n.d.a.), the group strongly criticises the

undemocratic and convention-violating nature of the Epidemics Law's (potentially) wide-reaching measures of forced vaccination, isolation, and testing of the Danish citizens.

### *Diagnosis of the global problem: The global conspiracy*

Highly sceptical towards the mainstream media discourse and its alleged censorship and character assassinations of corona-sceptical actors, all three organisations have engaged in the creation of their own subaltern spaces for the expression of alternative visions of society (including various conspiracy theories) throughout the three-year Covid-19 period. Both MIB and FBF argue that the media are in cahoots with the government, helping it spread its corona propaganda as part of a more general intimidation campaign, while JFK21 refers to the media as 'lying media'. MIB has also condemned the media's portrayal of its members as 'thugs', due to their rowdy demonstration style and the criminal backgrounds of some of its members. Moreover, deploring the lacking consideration of alternative views on Covid-19, FBF frequently calls for the media to investigate "what it is that we know that they do not know."

Unlike MIB, both FBF and especially JFK21 express numerous conspiracy theories on their subaltern online media platforms. On YouTube, Palsvig for instance voices support for QAnon and discusses the downsides to the 5G network. Both JFK21 and FBF draw on internationally spread conspiracy theories, like the fears of the underlying rationale of the 'Great Reset' plans, highlighting Klaus Schwab and his books, while voicing strong criticism of the global capitalist system. In December 2021, FBF for instance discussed the "eugenic agenda of the corona policy," visible in the "4th Industrial revolution" which entails "a fusion of man and technology" (FBF 2021b).

When questioning Covid-19's categorisation as a critical disease, JFK21 blames the government for creating an exaggerated threat as part of its collaboration with the (global) pharmaceutical industry, while arguing that the measures are financed by the 'global medication mafia' in the shape of 'Big Pharma' (Telegram 9.8.2021). Similarly, in January 2021, FBF published an advertisement in Danish mainstream newspapers, stating that "The claim that Covid-19 poses a serious threat to public health or society as a whole is a hitherto unsubstantiated conspiracy theory" (Bruun-Hansen 2021). Like JFK21, FBF insinuates that the government's policy measures are part of a larger global complot. As the group stated in its 'Call for rejection of compulsory vaccines', "we understand that politicians and others may be under pressure from covert forces that have compromising material on them, which is being used to blackmail and manipulate them against their will to impose this horror on their peoples. These dark forces are the main enemy" (FBF 2021c). Moreover, objecting to the government's strong testing strategy, in 2021, FBF started using the slogan "healthy people are not sick" (Telegram 24.11.2021). Finally, in August 2020, JFK21 accused WHO and the World Bank for their "planned release of a deadly virus" into world society (Henningsen 2020), while FBF refers to WHO as "an acknowledged corrupt organisation, mainly funded by the pharmaceutical industry" (FBF 2020b). Amongst other arguments, both groups argue that the vaccines are too experimental and involve gene manipulation and severe side effects, while speculating that this is a measure taken by the authorities to obtain more control of the population.

### *Prognosis against the government oppression: Between individual freedom and power to the people*

The claim for individual freedom is framed as the main solution to the perceived totalitarian turn and the measures implemented by the government. The solution to the global conspiracy is less clear. In any case, the



frames on individual freedom are not the only ones, since frames on giving the power to the people complement the strong focus on freedom.

As JFK21 states, its primary goal is to ensure the “Return of the power, money and health to the people” (JFK21 n.d.). Oppositely, MIB calls for a ‘fundamentally different society’ and plans to continue its actions until all freedoms have been retrieved and the government has relinquished control over the population. According to Ali Sufi, MIB does not refute the existence of Covid-19, nor is it against the vaccinations. Instead, it is its only request “that people should not be forced into anything. We fight for the Danes’ free choice” (as cited in Thorsen and Türker 2021). This entails a demand for the people to be more included in the democratic decision-making process (through more direct democracy), in order to have a direct influence on the policies affecting their day-to-day lives (Ibid.). Similarly, FBF’s overarching solution is to enable people to ‘take back control’ of their own lives and freedoms, and in this sense curb the system’s decade-long decay. Yet, unlike MIB, the group does not make many explicit calls for a new system or democracy, it rather remains a more momentary demand, solely in relation to the Covid-19 epidemic.

### *The meanings of ‘the people’: Inclusive and exclusive effects*

Linked to the demand for more power to the people, in this section we want to reflect on how the groups discursively construct the people. Besides the divide between the people and the elite, the representation of the people is not homogeneous. Some groups are considered to be part of the ‘real’ or ‘pure’ people whilst others are excluded, without implying that they are part of the elite. Thus, the online anti-restrictions groups explicitly replace the traditional left-right axis with the elite-people axis, framing the Danish government and health authorities plus the international pharmaceutical companies and WHO as the main culprits behind the measures. Nonetheless, the movement’s groups vary in their conceptions of who makes up ‘the people’.

While some groups, including FBF, refer to themselves as heroic ‘freedom fighters’ (*frihedskæmpere*, a Danish term with strong connotations to World War II), others see themselves as part of a much more inclusive ‘we’ group. This is particularly the case for MIB, whose name contains a partial representation of the people (as ‘men in black’). Considering all its members as being equal, the protest group’s followers consist of a highly diverse group of people, spanning both Covid-19 deniers, conspiracy believers, and vaccine-hesitant/refusers, plus many people who oppose the restrictions for more utilitarian reasons, such as the effect on their economy. Moreover, while protesters are predominantly men, MIB underlines that it welcomes all ethnicities, ages, genders, and religions and emphasises that the movement remains ideology free. Using the slogan “F^^^ THE RIGHT-WING, F^^^ THE LEFT-WING, WE ARE THE PEOPLE AND WE HAVE HAD ENOUGH!” it has disassociated itself from decidedly ideological actors. Instead, the group professes to be for “the people, the freedom and Denmark” (*folket, friheden og Danmark*), frequently utilising the Danish flag as a symbol of unity. Furthermore, in many of its social media posts, MIB deplors how the government’s actions affect ‘normal’ people, often focusing on socially marginalised citizens with a lower socio-economic status. One example is a Telegram post about the corona passport. Here, MIB criticises the “discriminative measures” against people who refuse to get tested:

It is a new slope that discriminates both people on their right to work, but also people who have earned the right to unemployment benefits, or are on welfare. We say no to discriminatory measures by the government which cause the creation of first- and second-class citizens in the labour market or which threaten people on their livelihoods!” (Telegram 12.11.2021).

In general, the appeals to the people are more recurrent by MIB than the two other groups, and its actions are attributed to the lack of representation of the people in parliament, emphasising that MIB is a movement for and by the people.

Nevertheless, at times, JFK21 *does* argue rather similarly to MIB regarding its understanding of ‘the people’. In a newspaper interview, Palsvig explained that “We are a threat in the sense that we represent the interests of ordinary people. The current system can only work because they are lying to the people. We are a truth threat, you might call it” (Honore 2019). Yet, at the same time, and unlike MIB, JFK21 admonishes the ‘snoring’ people, who do not oppose the corona restrictions, but instead just follow the government’s bidding. The party has also distributed a flyer with a list of signs to “tell if you have been brainwashed into the Covid Cult” (JFK21 2021a), and holds that the “common people who are fooled into wearing a mask, get tested and vaccinated” should be considered ‘victims’ of the totalitarian regime, and be helped to “wake up” and get “the strength to say no” (JFK 2021b).

**Table 4 - Characteristics of anti-restrictions groups in Denmark**

		<i>JFK21</i>	<i>FBF</i>	<i>MIB</i>
<b>Organisational form</b>		Movement Party, leader	Umbrella association, spokesperson	Horizontal movement, no leadership
<b>Arenas</b>	Public openness: media	Information campaigns, counter-experts		No interest in media presence
	Public openness: streets	Peaceful protests, email correspondence with politicians	Peaceful protests, legal initiatives	Rowdy protests, use of violence, major media attention
<b>Discourses/ Frames</b>	Against totalitarianism	Discourse of war: against elite (fascism) and people	Discourse of war: as freedom fighters against Nazis	Discourse of resistance: against state surveillance and control
	Conspiracy theories	Drawing on international conspiracy theories, global powers over state, more control of population		Lack of conspiracy theories
	Representing the people	Ordinary people and victims (people who follow Covid-19 measures)	People as like-minded people, against elite’s manipulation	Strong appeal to the people, beyond ideologies
	Rights to the people	Danes’ free choice	Take back control of their lives and freedoms	Call for a new democratic system

While underlining ‘our’ anti-systemic attitudes, FBF more or less shares JFK21’s rather ambivalent view on the remaining Danish population. On December 30, 2021, i.e., in the midst of a lockdown, FBF sent an open letter to Mette Frederiksen, stating that: “We are all those who have a deep and growing distrust of the corrupt and unjust government and the leadership of Denmark [...], and we are those who protest against the fundamental lack of the open and democratic processes upon which a legal society is based” (FBF 2021b). This ‘we’ is attempted united in FBF through the fostering of a community sentiment among its members.



FBF's motto is "Freedom, equality and community," and its logo depicts the geographical entity Denmark encircled by 18 male and female figures holding hands. On social media, many posts end with the words "Together we are strongest." Yet, at the same time, the 'We' does not include people holding different opinions than FBF. On the one hand, FBF expresses a general cordial respect for such viewpoints. Yet, on the other, and very differently from MIB, there is also much shaming and/or reference to citizens who are blind to the 'truth' or will not recognise alternative opinions. Attempting to explain the majority population's lacking questioning of the government's restrictions, the group often problematises other people's inability to see through the elite's manipulation of public opinion.

Table 4 presents the results of the analysis of the Danish anti-restrictions counterpublics, in terms of similarities and differences between the three analysed groups.

## 5. Discussion: Unifying the People and the Public Sphere

Trying to convince people to share their convictions, the three anti-restrictions groups face a contradiction: They claim to represent the ordinary people, but the polls show that the majority of Danes did not share their opinion and concerns, and the street protests were not particularly crowded. Moreover, the mainstream parties did not embrace the groups' demands, despite some sharing their ideas, like individual freedom or anti-systemic attitudes. However, these populist counterpublics were more influential on social media, where they have thousands of followers and were capable of articulating an opposition to the government and the media that was not otherwise present in the public sphere.

Perhaps the major paradox of the Danish anti-restrictions populist counterpublic is that its members claim to represent 'the people' as a unified subject (as ordinary people, as Danes), but the result is the proliferation of images of 'the people' that are not unified at all. Even though the anti-restrictions groups refer to a common enemy, state to be the 'real' people, and aim to take back freedom, they are barely connected and have been unable to create strong alliances. In its manifesto, MIB expresses how corona entails the opportunity to bring a diversity of people together: "The opposition to Corona has brought people together from different parts of Denmark, who have been dissatisfied with different tendencies in society, but have now found a common platform to stand united around a new overall system critique" (MIB n.d.).

However, neither the protests nor the groups were capable of unifying such diversity. Conspiracy theories, rather than becoming a struggle for the truth, have been important to mobilise people against the system. Thus, there is a fragmented vision of 'the people' and serious difficulties in getting access to the public sphere, as mass media are overly critical of these groups. Besides, the emphasis on individual freedoms did not create the basis for a strong populist articulation of the people as a collective subject.

There have been some attempts by anti-restrictions actors to obtain parliamentary representation. Several smaller parties have either been created around, or have started focusing on, the epidemic as their main party rationale (Krog, Lehmann and Lønstrup 2021), but it seems difficult for them to obtain parliamentary representation. The only parliamentary party voicing sustained criticism against the government measures, the far-right *New Right (Nye Borgerlige)*, catches only some of the demands of the anti-restrictions movement, but it does not share many of the conspiracy theories circulating online. In any case, the formation of counterpublics responds mainly to the rejection of the information by mass media and the government. The scope of influence is situated in the sympathisers without aspiring to influence the public sphere, since it is elite-controlled. Therefore, it seems highly unlikely that the movement as such will have much influence on Danish politics in the future. It is very hard to see what unites the groups politically, besides their objections to the Covid-19 restrictions, and they also lack strong links to an established political party.

## 6. Conclusion

In spite of a long tradition of political populism (especially with the *Danish People's Party* and, recently, *New Right*), the Danish case does not reflect higher vaccine hesitancy, as would be expected (Recio-Román et al. 2021). This can be attributed to both the mainstreaming of the populist (far-right) frames witnessed in recent years, but also the comparatively moderate government measures against Covid-19 and the generous public welfare state coverage in terms of tests and vaccines to facilitate a quick comeback to 'normality'. In this context, and by focusing on their main arenas and frames, we have explored how Danish anti-restrictions groups contributed to developing populist counterpublics against the elites. The Danish government's efficient communication strategy, which united the citizens around the shared endeavour to jointly battle the virus by staying apart, ensured that the struggle against the societal contagion was at the forefront, while corona-sceptics and individual freedom promoters' demands were moved to alternative counterpublic fringes.

We found that the anti-restrictions groups collectively form a predominantly extra-parliamentary movement, which unites around a strong criticism of the authorities' 'authoritarian' measures and global conspiracy theories (diagnoses) and calls for a return of the people's freedoms (prognosis). Similar to elsewhere, the scepticism regarding the measures was framed around populist tropes, most clearly expressed in the online, social media sphere, where particularly JFK21 and FBF focused on constructing their own subaltern arenas for alternative knowledge creation and dissemination. The groups, thus, share the rejection of the party system (and the system in general, fuelled in part by conspiracy theories) and mainstream media as main information producers. Instead, these arenas offer the possibility of articulating a Covid-19 counterdiscourse, where ordinary people fight against a heterogeneous elite sharing a common hidden agenda.

These frames and arena constructions have also been witnessed elsewhere across the globe. As in other countries, the restriction of civil liberties has been the most important frame (della Porta 2022), although the Danish mobilisation has employed less violent means. Yet, it has still been very active throughout the period of restrictions, offering a staunch criticism of the Danish welfare policies and provisions during the period, and objecting to any signs of forced measures by the political and health elites, thereby combining the populism of the 'ordinary people' with the libertarianism of the defence of individual freedoms. Unlike other contexts (for instance Germany and the US), where the anti-restrictions movement was co-opted by far-right organisations and activists (see e.g. van Dongen and Leidig 2021), the Danish mobilisation was more broadly based, encompassing numerous views on the response to Covid-19.

Disapproving of the government's patronising and belittling discourse, particularly towards dissenting and/or inquisitive voices, which were not permitted any space in the Danish public sphere, the activists established their own arenas for questioning the measures. Here, the group initiators could employ the resonant frame of 'removal of individual freedoms' as a framework to construct their own specific collective action frames around Covid-19, zooming in on their own particular, and highly varied, focus points of the objections to the corona measures. Besides offering spaces to mobilise against the national authorities, these arenas were also used as a means to offer solidarity and support to protest movements in other countries, which were inhibited from protesting due to lockdowns.

However, the populist counterpublics did have limited influence on the public sphere. The frames against authoritarianism became more efficient when applied to the 'mink case' and the critique of prime minister Mette Frederiksen, but the widespread acceptance of vaccination made it difficult to gain acceptance of anti-restrictions groups' frames among general publics, despite the focus on individual freedom. We conclude that the proliferation of populist counterpublics (and their arenas and frames) are quite like other European countries, but the welfare state coverage, the appellation to the spirit of the Danish community, and the lack of

institutional echo by populist parties hindered major influence by the counterpublics, which were limited to online groups with little presence in the streets. In any event, the Danish counterpublics reframed the populist sentiment which already existed in politics, oriented towards increasing societal polarisation. The anti-restrictions groups, however, did not have the capacity to expand this type of ‘pandemic populism’ to transform neither the public debate nor the political institutions.

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