

Status of Greenland in the Constitutional and Political System of Denmark: To Be or Not to Be a Sovereign Country?

Marko Stanković¹

University of Belgrade, Faculty of Law, Serbia

Submitted: 2025-04-12 • Accepted: 2025-05-26 • Published: 2025-06-16

Abstract: The article analyses the legal, political, economic and geostrategic aspects of Greenland's status in the Kingdom of Denmark. After the introductory remarks, there is a brief presentation of the theoretical concept of territorial autonomy, because Greenland is usually considered to be an autonomous territory. It is followed by an overview of the evolution of the status of Greenland in the Kingdom of Denmark. The central part of the paper is the analysis of the legal framework of the current status of Greenland, guaranteed by the Act on Greenland Self-Government of 2009, with particular reference to the system of government, competences, foreign policy and the possibility of gaining independence from Denmark. Next chapter contains the data about political parties in Greenland and recent political dynamics, with special reference to the March 2025 elections, which were marked by the annexation threat by the US President Donald Trump. The concluding remarks summarize the results of the research, especially the legal, political, economic and geostrategic aspects related to the possible declaration of independence of Greenland.

Keywords: Greenland, Kingdom of Denmark, devolution, autonomy, independence.

INTRODUCTION

The Danish Realm or the Kingdom of Denmark constitutes Denmark together with the autonomous territories of Greenland and the Faroe Islands. According to Tomasz Brańka (2018: 107), “the Kingdom of Denmark is a unique example of a unitary state composed of three clearly distinct components: Denmark and Greenland and the Faroe Islands, both of which enjoy considerable autonomy”. In other words, “both Greenland and the Faroe Islands are separate entities with their own culture and language, and – for Greenland – with their own ethnic origin as part of the Inuit people” (Jensen, 2003: 170). Describing such a constitutional situation, Gad (2020: 41) says that the community of Denmark, Greenland and the Faroe Islands is “a constitutional oxymoron connoting both imperial hierarchy and communal bonds”.

The European part of Denmark, also called “continental Denmark” or “Denmark proper”, has a territory of about 43,000 square kilometres and a population of about 5.7 million people (according to the 2016 census). Denmark is a parliamentary monarchy based on

¹ Corresponding author: prof.marko.stankovic@gmail.com • Phone: +381 64 13 69 67 0



free elections and multi-party system. The official language of Denmark is Danish, but there is also a German minority living in the south of the country, along the borderline between Denmark and Germany.

Greenland is one of Denmark's two autonomous overseas territories, that has about fifty times more territory and a hundred times fewer inhabitants than Denmark proper. It is the biggest island of the world that is not considered a continent, geographically located in the continent of North America, since it lies on the North American tectonic plate, between the Arctic and Atlantic oceans. About three-quarters of the territory of Greenland is covered by a permanent ice sheet (1,755,637 square kilometres of total 2,166,086 square kilometres), the only one outside Antarctica. This is the main reason why Greenland does not have a developed road infrastructure and does not have the opportunity to develop industry. As of 2022, Greenland's population is between 56,000 and 57,000 inhabitants, making it the least densely populated region in the world. The population of Greenland is concentrated mainly on its southwest coast. Today, most of its inhabitants are Inuit, whose ancestors migrated from Alaska through Northern Canada, gradually settling on the island until the 13th century. Nuuk is the capital with about 18,800 inhabitants. The official language is West-Greenlandic (*kalaallisut*), but there are two other dialects in the North (*avanersuaq*) and East (*tunu*). However, the island's strategic location, advancing climate change and reports of deposits of mineral resources all make Greenland a subject of interest to more than just researchers of the Arctic (Brańka, 2018: 107).

Having in mind the historical development, geostrategic location and legal and political status of Greenland, as well as the fact that the Kingdom of Denmark is formally a unitary state, Greenland is often classified as a unit of territorial autonomy in constitutional and political theory. In the following chapters of this article, we will expose the theoretical concept of territorial autonomy, followed by the historical development of the status of Greenland in the Kingdom of Denmark, as well as the status of Greenland under the Act on Greenland Self-Government of 2009 and legal, political, economic and security aspects of the position of Greenland in the modern world. Particular attention will be paid to the recent elections in Greenland, won by the opposition which does not advocate immediate independence from Denmark.

THE THEORETICAL CONCEPT AND CHARACTERISTICS OF TERRITORIAL AUTONOMY

Although it had many predecessors, the institution of territorial autonomy in the modern sense developed in the 20th century. Thus, it is considered a relatively new constitutional category and its application in modern constitutional systems is the exception rather than the rule. Besides that, territorial autonomy is not a pure and generally accepted concept of constitutional law or public international law (Orlović, 2024: 171). It is primarily a European creation, which occurs sporadically in some non-European unitary states (China, Philippines, Tanzania, Chile, etc.). The peculiarities of the part of the territory that receives autonomous status are usually historical, ethnic, cultural and linguistic in nature, and are often related to geographical and economic factors. However, the key feature of territorial autonomy is most often its historical foundation.



Territorial autonomy in one country can be achieved in a variety of ways. It is often established by a constitution (regions in Italy, Azores and Madeira in Portugal, provincial autonomy in Serbia), and rarely by an international treaty (South Tyrol in Italy, Åland Islands in Finland). However, the usual way to establish territorial autonomy is by law, as is the case in the United Kingdom (Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland), as well as in Denmark (Greenland and the Faroe Islands).

Territorial autonomy constitutes the intermediate level of government, often referred to as a region, which differs from local self-government in having a qualitatively higher authority of originally regulating legal relations and legislation in the material sense (Orlović, 2024: 171). It is difficult to define the basic features of territorial autonomy, since this form of vertical organization of powers did not originate on a predetermined model, but developed in practice. In addition, the number of countries that have territorial autonomy in the world is relatively small, and units of territorial autonomy in these countries have very different statuses, which further complicates the definition of a general theoretical model of territorial autonomy. In other words, almost every country that has territorial autonomy has created its own authentic model of this form of vertical division of powers. Finally, territorial autonomy in its modern form emerged relatively soon, after the First World War, which means that it has existed in practice for just over a century, which is an additional reason why defining a general theoretical model is difficult. Broadly speaking, it can be said that territorial autonomy has three features: 1) the right of territorial autonomy to enact its own laws, 2) prescribing the status of territorial autonomy by the laws of the state, and not by its constitution, and 3) the inability of territorial autonomy units to influence the conduct of the policies of central state authorities (De Vergotini, 2015: 464–465). In other words, units of territorial autonomy are legislative entities, whose status is regulated by the laws of the state in which they are established, and which do not participate in the composition and exercise of the competences of the central state authorities (Petrov & Stanković, 2020: 392).

Generally speaking, Greenland meets all the criteria to be classified as a unit of territorial autonomy (Palermo & Kössler, 2017: 59), although in some areas it exceeds these criteria and approaches the status of a federal unit within a federation, and even the status of an independent state. Gad (2020: 30) states that Greenland has a constitutional status which protects it against unilateral Danish intervention. The objective that distances Greenland from the classic unit of territorial autonomy in a unitary state is the fact that it is located on a different continent from the country to which it belongs, and that it is incomparably larger in territory than Denmark. In the following chapters, we will analyse how the status of Greenland has evolved over the centuries and what the extent of Greenland's autonomy in today's Danish Realm is.

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE EVOLUTION OF THE STATUS OF GREENLAND IN THE KINGDOM OF DENMARK

The shores of Greenland were first settled by the Vikings in the 10th century, when they established the first settlements there in 985, searching for a better life. The Viking civilization managed to survive for several generations in Greenland, before disappearing in



the middle of the 15th century. A variety of factors contributed to the disappearance of the Viking colony, and researchers often think that the decisive factor was a sustained drop in temperatures called the Little Ice Age.

However, “from the point of view of Danish constitutional history, Greenland and the Faroe Islands came under the Danish crown when it was fused with the Norwegian crown in the fourteenth century” (Gad, 2020: 30). Namely, towards the very end of the 14th century (in 1397), Danish Queen Margrethe created the Kalmar Union (*Kalmarunionen*), which by its nature was a personal union, since Queen Margrethe, acquired the right to carry both the Norwegian and Swedish crowns, in addition to the Danish one. The Kalmar Union existed until 1523, when it was abandoned by Sweden, after Gustav I Erikson Vasa crowned himself King of Sweden. Norway remained under the Danish crown until the 19th century.

Greenland's ties with Norway were severed by the Treaty of Kiel in 1814, when Sweden gained control of Norway, while Denmark retained overseas territories that then included several smaller territories in India, Western Africa and the Caribbean, as well as the Faroe Islands, Iceland, and Greenland. After that, Greenland, Island and the Faroe Islands were exclusively Danish colonial possessions. In 1867, the United States of America (USA) became interested in Greenland and Iceland, offering vast amounts of cash to Denmark for both countries, but the answer was a resounding no. In the same year, the USA had bought Alaska from Russia, so there is no doubt that the purchase offer to Denmark was serious. After this first attempt to buy Greenland in the 19th century, the USA would continue to make similar offers in the next two centuries, offering to buy Greenland three more times.

The First World War was not an issue for Greenland, because Denmark maintained its neutrality throughout the war and traded with both sides. This, however, was not the case in the Second World War, even though Denmark tried to remain neutral at the beginning of the war. However, Denmark could not manage to uphold that decision. Germany invaded Denmark and Norway to prevent their occupation by France and Great Britain. The German occupiers ordered the Danish political and social institutions to continue to work rather routinely until the end of the war. Just as the Germans had entered Denmark and Norway to dissuade the Allies, the Great Britain occupied the Faroe Islands to avoid a German takeover of the area. The Great Britain had also occupied Iceland, but turned it over to the then neutral USA. Iceland became an independent Republic in 1944. As far as Greenland was concerned, in 1941 Denmark asked the neutral USA to defend the territory. Greenland achieved a greater sense of self-reliance during wartime which was not allowed during the previous Danish rule, because “originally, Greenlanders were considered racially different, perhaps masters of their particular ecology but unfit for civilization, and hence, in need of Danish protection” (Gad, 2020: 32). Also, “during the colonial era, Greenland was considered as a trading colony, where the Royal Greenlandic Commerce Company regulated all commerce to and from Greenland” (Ackrén, 2022: 4).

When the Second World War concluded in 1945, Greenland was returned to Denmark. By this time the Greenlanders had gained some exposure and complained to the Danish authorities about their trade monopoly. Sitting on the sidelines, the USA was watching this situation very closely, so in 1946 they offered to buy Greenland from Denmark for the second time, but Denmark refused the offer. The problem was resolved only a few years later, by the 1951 Defence of Greenland Agreement, which gave Denmark the right to supervise



the main USA military base in Greenland for the next twenty years and to establish joint defence areas with the USA. The treaty actually gave legitimacy to the continued presence of the USA military forces in Greenland, since Denmark was a member of NATO since its inception in 1949.

Meanwhile, after gaining independence from Sweden in the early 20th century, Norway also made claims to its earlier colonial possessions, particularly Greenland. The Norwegians had claimed that Greenland has been part of the Kingdom of Norway since 1261. Moreover, in July 1931, Norway occupied a part of east Greenland. A dispute between two states over the right to Greenland was resolved when the International Court of Justice in The Hague ruled in favour of Denmark in 1935.

In 1953, Greenland became an equal part of the Danish Kingdom as the new Danish Constitution ended the island's colonial status and started post-colonial relations between the former colonizer and the island. The island formally became the part of Danish administrative division as a district (*amt*) and the Danish citizenship was extended to Greenlanders. In that period, Danish policy towards Greenland consisted in an attempt to culturally assimilate Greenlanders. Denmark stipulated the exclusive use of the Danish language in official communications and required Greenlanders to come to Denmark for secondary education. However, assimilation failed as Greenland's elite began to rebuild Greenland's cultural identity, which peaked in the 1970s. On the other hand, "what was formally decolonization felt like neocolonialism; the physical infrastructure framing the new welfare was built by Danish entrepreneurs and builders, more Danes were recruited to man the welfare institutions, and both infrastructure and institutions were largely built on Danish blueprints" (Gad, 2020: 34).

Greenland was granted home rule as a part of a self-governance act in 1979. The island has assumed primary political and social competences, while foreign, defence and security policies remained under the jurisdiction of the Danish government. Together with Denmark, Greenland became part of the European Communities in 1979. However, in a referendum in February 1982, Greenlanders narrowly voted to withdraw from the European Communities, and that decision entered into force in 1985. The main reasons for the withdrawal were Greenland's disagreement with regulations on commercial fishing and a ban on seal skin products. In reality, Greenland left the European Communities only to be associated with the Communities through the well-established category of Overseas Countries and Territories (Beach, 2020: 413). The Overseas Countries and Territories (OCT) remain outside the EU *acquis*, but they enjoy free movement of people and tax-free access for exports to the Single Market.

After the acquisition of home rule in 1979, Greenland quickly became self-sufficient in exercising its competences. According to Brańka (2018: 108), "the Greenland Home Rule Act of 1979 was the product of a compromise, and was viewed as a political success and a model for the termination of colonial domination". However, "already by 1992, much earlier than anyone had imagined, the home rule government had built a brand-new bureaucracy from scratch in Nuuk and taken home not only political responsibility but also the practical organization of major services from hospitals and helicopters to grocery stores in next to 100 isolated settlements and a world-leading shrimp export business" (Gad, 2020: 34). Therefore, it was only a question of time when the need for a new extension of Greenland's autonomy would arise.



This happened towards the end of the last century, when “Greenland’s pursuit of a redefined relationship with Denmark found expression in the Commission on Self-Governance, established in 1999” (Brańka, 2018: 108). The Commission concluded that Greenland had fulfilled all the conditions established in the decolonization process for a territory to cope with the full right of self-determination, as understood in Article 1 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. The Report was adopted in November 2003 by the parliament of Greenland. After that, Greenlandic–Danish Self-Government Commission was established in June 2004. In April 2008 the Commission submitted the draft of a new Act on Greenland Self-Government. The Act came into force on June 21, 2009, after more than three-quarters of Greenlanders voted for the Act in a referendum. When the Act on Greenland Self-Government was finally adopted by the Danish Parliament, Greenland became almost independent in political terms, with the formal right to become fully independent from Denmark. But even though Greenland handles their domestic matters internally, in terms of economy it still relies on Denmark for financial support. Some experts think that Greenland is not yet capable of ruling itself effectively without a helping hand from Denmark.

In short, it can be summarized that the status of Greenland has gone through three phases after the decolonization in 1953. In the first phase, which lasted from 1953 to 1979, Greenland was the part of the administrative division of Denmark. In the second phase, which lasted from 1979 to 2009, Greenland was given a home rule. Finally, in the third phase, which began with the adoption of the Act on Greenland Self-Government of 2009, Greenland gained even broader autonomy, with the possibility of becoming an independent state.

It is important to emphasize that the economic and strategic position of Greenland is very important, which is why it arouses the interest of major world powers, especially the United States of America. The USA has maintained its presence in Greenland in the form of military bases and has remained interested in buying Greenland. The third offer for the purchase of Greenland by the USA, after those of 1867 and 1946, came in 2019, when President Donald Trump publicly offered to buy Greenland from Denmark. In response to this, the Danish Prime Minister Met Fredericksen said that Greenland is not for sale. The statement of the US President also drew the ear of Greenland’s prime minister Kim Kielsen who said that Greenland cannot be sold, but that it is open for trade and cooperation with other countries including the USA. The last, fourth offer was made in 2025 when President Donald Trump began his second presidential term and the offer was once again rejected by Denmark.

STATUS OF GREENLAND UNDER THE 2009 ACT ON GREENLAND SELF-GOVERNMENT

Greenland is mentioned only six times in the Danish Constitution of 1953, with regard to the representation in parliament (Folketing), referendum, human rights and local elections. The status of Greenland is prescribed by a law called the Act on Greenland Self-Government of 2009. In this respect, Greenland fits into the theoretical model of territorial



autonomy, which implies that the status of a unit of territorial autonomy is governed by a law, although this law is not entirely ordinary because the citizens of Greenland accepted it in a referendum.

However, under the Act on Greenland Self-Government of 2009, that Danish overseas territory is on the verge of independence. This is already clear from the preamble of the Act, which states that the people of Greenland have the right to self-determination and that Denmark and Greenland are “equal partners”: “Recognising that the people of Greenland is a people pursuant to international law with the right of self-determination, the Act is based on a wish to foster equality and mutual respect in the partnership between Denmark and Greenland. Accordingly, the Act is based on an agreement between *Naalakkersuisut* [Greenland Government] and the Danish Government as equal partners”. Act of 2009 defines Greenlanders as a people according to international law with the right to self-determination (Simović et al., 2018: 242–243) and that “means that Greenlanders can secede from the Danish Realm in the future if the population has the will to do so” (Ackrén, 2022: 5).

In addition, Greenland has many other features of statehood, such as its own flag, coat of arms and anthem. The Act on Greenland Self-Government also stipulates that Greenlandic shall be the official language in Greenland (Chapter 7, Article 20), and, as it is well known, language and cultural identity are important elements of any nation.

The Act on Greenland Self-Government contains norms on the organs of the Greenlandic self-government and their relations with the Danish central authorities, norms on the jurisdiction of the Greenlandic self-government with particular reference to the right of Greenland to conduct its own foreign affairs, norms on the economic relations between Greenland and Denmark, as well as the norms on right of Greenland to decide on independence. These are legal norms that will be analysed in the remaining part of this section of the article.

THE SELF-GOVERNMENT LEGISLATIVE, EXECUTIVE AND JUDICIAL AUTHORITIES AND THEIR RELATIONS TO DANISH CENTRAL AUTHORITIES

After it is mentioned in the preamble to the Act on Greenland Self-Government, Greenland's self-reliance is clearly defined in the normative part of its text. Article 1 of the Act stipulates that Greenland will have all three state powers – legislative, executive and judicial – whereby “the legislative power shall lie with *Inatsisartut* [Greenland Parliament], the executive power with *Naalakkersuisut*, and the judicial power with the courts of law”. It can be noted that the Act established a simple scheme of authorities based on the principles of majoritarian democracy, since there was no need to establish consociative mechanisms, given the homogeneity and small size of the Greenlandic population. Generally speaking, majoritarian democracy is suitable for homogeneous, and consociative democracy for segmented societies (Marković, 2023: 16).

The existence of a judicial power within an autonomous unit transcends the theoretical model of territorial autonomy and brings Greenland closer to the status of a federal unit within a federation. However, unlike the federal units in classical federations, Greenland does not have its own constitutional authority, i.e. the right to enact its own constitution (Stanković, 2020: 330). In that sense, the status of Greenland does not reach the usual



standards in classical federations (the USA, Germany, Switzerland, Australia), although in recent times there are more and more federations in which federal units do not have their own constitutional capacity at all (Belgium, Spain) or the right to adopt their own constitutions is guaranteed only to some of them (India, the Russian Federation, South Africa). A few decades ago, Pavle Nikolić (1993: 429) noticed that the demarcation line between the concepts of a federal unit and a unit of territorial autonomy is precisely “manifested in the absence of a constitutional and judicial function”. Greenland has judicial power, but formally does not have the right to enact its own constitution, so, from a theoretical point of view, it lies between the model of a federal unit and a unit of territorial autonomy. However, the situation seems to be changing regarding the possibility of Greenland adopting its own constitution. According to Gad (2020: 41) “the Danish government has changed its position, accepting that separate Faroese and Greenlandic constitutions are acceptable as long as they do not contradict the Danish Constitution”.

For the status of federal units in the federations, Greenland also lacks participation within the central authorities. The Danish parliament is unicameral, and Greenland is represented in it by only two deputies (Constitution of Denmark, Article 28), a negligible number compared to the total of 179 members of the Danish Folketing. It is clear that just over one percent of the representatives is unable to protect Greenland’s interests or prevent the Danish parliament from encroaching on Greenland’s status. Nevertheless, it must be said that the number of representatives of Greenland is in line with the population of that autonomous territory, since Greenland has a hundred times fewer inhabitants than Denmark. However, in the absence of the significant participation of Greenland’s representatives in the Danish Parliament, the Act on Greenland Self-Government provides a different mechanism that allows Greenland’s reaction in cases of enactment of laws and regulations relating to Greenland. Chapter 5 of the Act on Greenland Self-Government is dedicated to cooperation between the Greenland and Denmark regarding statutes and administrative orders. The Danish Government’s bills which comprise or may be brought into force for Greenland must, before they are presented to the Folketing, be submitted to the Greenland self-government authorities for comments. Also, the Danish Government shall await the Greenland self-government authorities’ comments before presenting government bills which contain provisions that exclusively apply to Greenland or are of particular importance to Greenland to the Folketing (Article 17). The Act contains almost identical norms for administrative orders which contain provisions that exclusively apply to Greenland or are of particular importance to Greenland (Article 18). Although the comments of the Greenlandic authorities on these legal acts are not binding, they have considerable political weight and it is difficult to imagine that the Danish central political authorities could ignore them. In addition, if that were to happen, Greenland would have the option of initiating a procedure for conflict resolution with the central government.

Conflict resolution procedure between the Greenlandic and Danish authorities is prescribed in the Chapter 6 of the Act on Greenland Self-Government. The procedure is identical to the one prescribed six decades earlier by the Home Rule Act of the Faroe Islands (1948). The mechanism for resolving disputes is a seven-member *ad hoc* body, composed of two representatives each from Greenland and Denmark and three Supreme Court judges. The Act (Article 19) prescribes that if any question of doubt arises between the Greenland self-government authorities and the central authorities of the Realm concerning the



self-government authorities' responsibility in relation to the central authorities, the Danish or Greenlandic government may decide to lay the question before a board consisting of two members nominated by the Danish government, two members nominated by Greenlandic government, and three judges of the Supreme Court of Denmark nominated by its President, one of whom shall be nominated as chairman. If the four members nominated by two governments reach an agreement, the question shall be considered settled, but if these four fail to reach an agreement, the question shall be decided by the three Supreme Court judges. The board may decide to suspend the enactment or decision which has been placed before the board until such time as the board's decision is taken. It seems that this mechanism is well balanced, because first the representatives of the executive branch are given the opportunity to reach an agreement, and if this does not happen, only then the dispute is resolved by the representatives of the highest judicial body of the Realm. In this way, the procedure ensures both fairness and efficiency.

THE SELF-GOVERNMENT COMPETENCES

In its chapter 2, the Act on Greenland Self-Government defines the competences of Greenland's self-governing authorities. Article 2 of the Act allows the self-government bodies of Greenland to take over competences in the areas listed on the two lists that are an integral part of the Act, with List I containing five and List II another 28 competencies. The next article of the Act (Article 3) prescribes the manner and dynamics of taking over the competences and it is prescribed that the competencies from List I shall be transferred to the Greenland self-government authorities at points of time fixed by the self-government authorities, and the competencies from List II shall be transferred to the Greenland self-government authorities at points of time fixed by the self-government authorities after negotiation with the central authorities of the Realm.

In addition to the competences listed in the two lists, the Act allows for other competences to be transferred to the Greenlandic authorities, in accordance with the agreement of the Danish and Greenlandic governments (Article 4). In other words, "the areas indicated in the Schedule are not exclusive and the authorities of Denmark and Greenland may agree to expand this list by adding further fields of responsibility" (Brańka, 2018: 112). According to Gad (2020: 31) only five competences are explicitly exempted from takeover: 1) Constitution, 2) citizenship, 3) Supreme Court, 4) foreign, security and defence policy, and 5) foreign exchange and monetary policy. Thus, on the internal level, Greenland has or can dispose of almost all of the competencies, except for the five mentioned.

GREENLAND IN FOREIGN AFFAIRS

In addition to internal, Greenland also has significant competences at the international level. The longest, fourth chapter of the Act on Greenland Self-Government, regulates Greenland's conduct in foreign affairs. The right to conduct its own foreign affairs goes far beyond the standards of territorial autonomy and brings Greenland's autonomy closer to that of an independent state in international relations. The Act stipulates that the Danish and Greenland governments shall cooperate in the conduct of foreign affairs "with a view to safeguarding the interests of Greenland as well as the general interests of the Kingdom



of Denmark”, and also that “the powers granted to *Naalakkersuisut* in this Chapter shall not limit the Danish authorities’ constitutional responsibility and powers in international affairs, as foreign and security policy matters are affairs of the Realm” (Article 11).

The Act on Greenland Self-Government precisely regulates the Greenlandic government’s right to conclude international treaties. According to these legal provisions, the Greenlandic government may, on behalf of the Realm, negotiate and conclude agreements under international law with foreign states and international organisations, including administrative agreements which exclusively concern Greenland and entirely relate to fields of responsibility taken over. The right of autonomous territories to participate independently in international relations and to conclude international treaties is very rare, even in federal states, and in this respect an exception can be found in Belgium, whose communities and regions have the right to conclude international agreements in areas within their competence (Stanković, 2020: 216). The Act on Greenland Self-Government precisely prescribes the situations in which Greenland has the right to conclude international treaties on its own, as well as the situations in which it does not have the right to do so, but concludes agreements with the consent of the Danish government. These are international treaties “affecting the defence and security policy as well as agreements under international law which are to apply to Denmark, or which are negotiated within an international organisation of which the Kingdom of Denmark is a member” (Act on Greenland Self-Government, Article 11, Paragraph 4).

The Act on Greenland Self-Government also contains obligations for the Danish government when concluding international treaties in the areas of interest to Greenland (Article 12). The Danish government shall inform Greenland government before negotiations are initiated regarding agreements under international law which are of particular importance to Greenland in matters which exclusively concern Greenland. The Danish government may authorise Greenland government to conduct the negotiations within the cooperation of the Foreign Service of Danish government. Agreements where Denmark and Greenland have been jointly involved in the negotiations shall be signed by the Danish government, if possible, together with Greenland government. At the end, agreements under the international law which are of particular importance to Greenland must, before they are concluded or terminated, be submitted to Greenland government for comments. This means that not only the Greenlandic government have the right to conclude international treaties, but also that the Danish government has certain restrictions when concluding treaties in the areas concerning Greenland. And if the Danish government deems it necessary to conclude the agreement without the consent of Greenlandic government, this shall, to the widest extent possible, have no effect on Greenland.

Finally, the Act allows Greenland to become a member of international organizations that allow entities other than states to become members (Article 14). In addition, the representatives of Greenland may be appointed to the diplomatic missions of the Kingdom of Denmark to deal with Greenland’s interests in the areas of responsibility that have been fully assumed by the Greenlandic self-government authorities (Article 15). Greenland self-government authorities shall be subject to the obligations that arise out of agreements under the international law and other international rules which are at any time binding on the Realm (Article 16).



Overall, Greenland's participation in international relations is almost comprehensive, since this autonomous territory has the right to conclude international agreements, to participate in diplomatic missions of the Kingdom of Denmark, and to become a member of international organizations in which there is a possibility of membership of entities that are not states. In addition, the Kingdom of Denmark is limited to a certain extent in its actions in international relations in cases where it concludes agreements concerning the interests of Greenland, whereby the international sovereignty of the state is to a certain extent limited. In practice, it is, for example, "inconvenient for a Danish minister of foreign affairs to discuss Arctic affairs with a foreign colleague without a Greenlandic counterpart present" (Gad, 2020: 31). However, it remains an open question as to whether Greenland would be able to run a more effective foreign policy being an independent state in legal terms but having no Danish subsidy or diplomatic support (Brańka, 2018: 125).

ECONOMIC RELATIONS BETWEEN GREENLAND AND DENMARK

Very important part of the Act on Greenland Self-Government is its Chapter 3, that regulates economic relations between Greenland and Denmark. Article 5 of the Act provides for an annual subsidy paid by the Danish Government to Greenland, which is set in absolute terms in Danish kroner (DKK), with the possibility of adjusting it to annual price increases. Such a provision is a good indicator of Greenland's economic dependence on Denmark, which raises questions about Greenland's ability to survive as an independent state in the future.

However, the Article 6 of the Act stipulates that the competencies taken over by the Greenlandic self-government authorities have to be financed by them, but also that they shall assume the real assets that are directly related to a field of responsibility that is taken over. Therefore, it is clear that the dynamics by which the Greenlandic authorities will assume competences is directly related to their ability to finance them on their own. Special provisions of the Act regulate income from mineral resources, which are the most significant natural wealth of Greenland, and they prescribe that the revenue from mineral resource activities in Greenland shall accrue to the Greenland self-government authorities, as well as that Denmark's subsidy to Greenland may be gradually reduced in line with the growth of Greenland's mineral revenues (Articles 7–10 of the Act).

In addition to that, the US Geological Survey estimated that the Arctic holds one-fifth of the world's untapped reserves of natural gas and crude oil (Gautier et al., 2009: 117). Many authors think that the natural resources of Greenland will ensure the island's economic independence from Denmark in the future, thereby removing the greatest obstacle on the path to full independence (Brańka, 2018: 121). Although the extraction of natural resources may contribute to the development of the island, Greenland currently has only two operating mines. A particular problem may be that an increase in mining could threaten Greenland's traditional sources of income, fishing and tourism. Today, it is generally agreed that the proceeds from the mining industry will not enable Greenland to become economically independent in the short term or give up the entire Danish subsidy.



GREENLAND'S ACCESS TO INDEPENDENCE

In short, “Greenland is an autonomous region with extended powers and has also the right to secede from Denmark” (Ackrén, 2022: 15). The right to secede does not exist even in most of modern federations. Such a right is enshrined in only two constitutions of modern federations – Ethiopia, and St. Kitts and Nevis. In addition, the procedure for secession from the federation in Canada is regulated by law, which means that the right to secession is a legal category in that federation (Simović, 2005: 147). The situation is very similar in Greenland, where its right to leave the union with Kingdom of Denmark is regulated by the law. Apart from that, it seems that the framers of the Act on Greenland Self-Government had in mind the Canadian norms on secession from the federation, since there are many similarities between the two procedures.

Chapter 8 of the Act on Greenland Self-Government contains only one article (Article 21) that prescribes Greenland's accession to independence. At the beginning, it is said that “decision regarding Greenland's independence shall be taken by the people of Greenland”. At first glance, it could be concluded from such a formulation that Greenland is allowed to become independent country solely by its unilateral decision. However, from the following provisions of the Act, it is clear that Greenland does not have the right to unilaterally leave the union with the Kingdom of Denmark. The second paragraph of the same article stipulates that after such a decision negotiations shall commence between governments of Denmark and Greenland “with a view to the introduction of independence for Greenland”. An agreement between two governments regarding the introduction of independence for Greenland shall be concluded with the consent of Parliament of Greenland (*Inatsisartut*) and shall be endorsed by a referendum in Greenland. The agreement shall, furthermore, be concluded with the consent of the Danish Parliament (Folketing). At the end, the Act states that “independence for Greenland shall imply that Greenland assumes sovereignty over the Greenland territory”.

So, although the Act at the very beginning of Article 21 states that the decision on Greenland's independence should be made by the people of Greenland, it is clear that the legal procedure for gaining Greenlandic independence is much more complex and that it also implies the consent of the highest political authorities of the Kingdom of Denmark. In other words, “the details of the independence process will thus be jointly agreed by the authorities of Greenland and Denmark” (Brańka, 2018: 112). This legal procedure consists of several phases. In the first phase, the people of Greenland should probably have to decide in a referendum whether they want to be independent. After that, the second phase consists of negotiations between the governments of Greenland and Denmark on Greenland's independence, i.e. how this independence should be introduced. According to the Act, the negotiations should end with an agreement between the two governments on Greenland's independence. However, the Act does not provide any solution for the case that such an agreement is not reached. Therefore, there is a question what would happen in such a case? Furthermore, the Act stipulates that the agreement reached between two governments must be approved both by the Greenlandic and the Danish parliaments. The question also arises what the solution is in the situation where one of the two parliaments, in particular the Danish Folketing, does not give its consent to the concluded agreement. In other words, would the lack of consent of the Danish parliament in this case mean that the procedure ends in a negative way, i.e. that Greenland cannot gain independence?



Finally, the fourth phase of Greenland's independence procedure implies that the Greenlandic people once again vote in a referendum on whether they accept the agreement concluded by two governments. Only in that case Greenland's independence would be achieved. In short, the Greenland independence procedure involves two referendums and an agreement concluded between two governments, with the consent of two parliaments. It is, therefore, clear that Greenland's independence is not legally possible only on the basis of a unilateral decision by the people of Greenland.

However, secession is not only a legal issue, but also a political one. From a political point of view, Greenland's independence seems much easier to achieve than from a legal point of view. In today's world, it seems almost impossible for Denmark to prevent Greenland's independence if its population votes in favour of independence in a referendum. Negotiations between the two governments, with the consent of both parliaments, would probably have the character of technical negotiations on how Greenland would take over the remaining state functions from Denmark, as well as on the end of Danish subsidies to Greenlandic self-government. In other words, in reality, the Danish central government cannot be expected to veto the decision of the Greenland people to form their own state.

POLITICAL PARTIES AND RECENT POLITICAL DYNAMICS IN GREENLAND

The topic of full independence of Greenland is very important in the political life of this autonomous territory, since all Greenlandic political parties have often used it in their campaigns since the end of the last century. According to Brańka (2018: 113), "from the late 1990s, leading Greenlandic politicians increasingly pressed for full independence for the island".

Political parties in Greenland have been active for less than half a century. The first party, *Siumut* (Forward), was founded in 1977. That party was in power continuously from its foundation until 2009, when Greenland gained greater autonomy. It is a social democratic party that has always advocated Greenland's gradual independence from Denmark. In 1978, two more parties were founded – the conservative *Atassut* (Feeling of Community), which advocated strengthening relations with Denmark, and *Inuit Ataqatigiit* (Community of the People), which advocated Greenland's independence and the establishment of close relations with the inhabitants of Alaska and Northern Canada. *Inuit Ataqatigiit* made a major electoral breakthrough in the 2009 Greenlandic parliamentary elections, and after the 2021 elections it was the strongest party to lead a coalition government.

In the 21st century, several other political parties have been founded. The Democrats (*Demokraatit*) were founded in 2002, and their program initially envisaged unionism with Denmark, but was later revised to a "soft" independence. In the second decade of the 21st century, three more parties were founded – *Naleraq* (Point of Orientation) and *Nunatta Qitornai* (Descendants of Our Land), which both advocate independence, and *Suleqatigi-issitsisut* (Cooperation Party), which propagates strengthening relations with Denmark. The last party, *Qulleq* (Oil Lamp), was founded in 2023, and it advocates for Greenland's independence and in particular for the development of the oil industry.



The last elections were held on March 11, 2025, under the obvious influence of international factors, among which the most significant was undoubtedly the impact of the US President Donald Trump's annexation threat. In other words, "Trump's idea to annex the territory has thrown an international spotlight on the election and raised questions about the island's future security as the United States, Russia and China vie for influence in the Arctic" (Yeung & Kent, 2025). Taking into account the new circumstances, even Greenlandic pro-independence political parties changed their rhetoric, showing scepticism towards the idea of rapid independence. Even the former prime minister Múte Bourup Egede from the *Inuit Ataqatigiit* played down any idea of immediate independence and instead emphasized the need for reforms in cooperation between the Danish and Greenlandic governments.

The 2025 election results were different than ever before. Unlike the previous elections, which were usually dominated by traditional political parties founded in the 1970s, the last elections were won by two parties founded in this century – *Demokraatit* and *Naleraq*. Three more parties won seats (*Inuit Ataqatigiit*, *Siumut*, and *Atassut*), so currently there are five parties in the parliament. Individually, the strongest party is the *Demokraatit*, which won over 30 percent of the votes in the elections, i.e. ten seats in parliament (of total 31). Historically, that party has been sceptical about Greenlandic independence, as the large proportion of party leaders are of Danish origin, but it has recently corrected its policy and advocates the gradual ("soft") independence of Greenland from Denmark, that should happen in the moment when Greenland becomes economically capable of maintaining the achieved level of living standard and independently financing the exercise of all state competencies.

The new Greenlandic government was formed in late March 2025, and the coalition that formed the government is made up by *Demokraatit* with the support of the traditional parties *Inuit Ataqatigiit*, *Siumut*, and *Atassut*. Four parties won 23 of the 31 seats in the parliament, meaning the government has the support of about three-quarters of parliamentarians. The ten-member cabinet consists of four members from the *Demokraatit* (who also gave the Prime Minister – Jens-Frederik Nielsen), four ministers come from the *Inuit Ataqatigiit* (among others, former Prime Minister Egede became the Minister of finance and taxation), one from *Siumut* and one from *Atassut*. The coalition agreement was reached just before the visit of the US Vice President JD Vance, sending him a clear political message (Greenland forms new government hours, 2025). The new Greenlandic government seems to be well-balanced, with representatives from four political parties, two of which traditionally advocate independence (*Inuit Ataqatigiit* and *Siumut*), while two oppose a quick declaration of independence (*Demokraatit* and *Atassut*).

When it comes to the local population, the vast majority of Greenlanders are supporters of independence. A 2025 poll (Greenland forms new government hours, 2025) showed that 84% of Greenlanders would support independence from Denmark. However, that support is not unconditional, nor do Greenlanders want independence at any cost, since the 45% of the population would oppose independence if it meant a lower standard of living, which shows once again that the issue of Greenland's independence is largely an economic one. Only 8% of Greenlanders think that Greenland could become an independent state within a year, while 52% think it could happen within ten or even twenty years. Finally, when asked whether they were more in favour of an alliance with Denmark or the United States, 85% of Greenlanders opted for Denmark and only 6% for the United States (Euractiv, 2025).



CONCLUDING REMARKS: LEGAL AND POLITICAL ASPECTS OF GREENLAND'S POSITION TODAY

From the analysed legal norms contained in the Act on Greenland Self-Government of 2009, it can be concluded that the contemporary status of Greenland is polyvalent. In some respects, this status has the hallmarks of territorial autonomy, in some respects the characteristics of a federal unit within a federation, while in some respects the status of Greenland is almost equal to the status of an independent state. In this regard, the provisions on Greenland's participation in foreign affairs and the possibility of that autonomous territory to gain independence from Denmark are particularly important. It should also be emphasized that "the government in Copenhagen has accepted the fact that Greenland (and the Faroe Islands) has taken a gradual, but most likely irreversible, path towards independence" (Brańka, 2018: 119).

In that sense, despite the fact that Greenland is politically almost independent from Denmark, that territory depends on its economic aid. In other words, the question is whether Greenland would be able to finance the entirety of state competencies on its own if it took them over from Denmark. One of the major problems for Greenland's economy is the reform of public administration, which is modelled after Denmark's. Having that in mind, the long-term goal for Greenland has to be achieving full economic self-sustainability. At the same time, a very important aspect of Greenland's economy is the possibility for its citizens to access Danish social services and jobs in the European Union thanks to a Danish passport. That is why Greenland's economic viability is set as the first obstacle to its possible independence.

In addition to the economic issues, the second obstacle to Greenland's possible independence is deeply geostrategic in nature. Greenland's geostrategic location is extremely significant for the defence of the North American continent, as well as potential control over the Arctic. According to Gad (2020: 36), "Greenland is key to controlling access to the North American continent for missiles from Eurasia in general and from the Kola Peninsula in particular". This is why defence planning in Greenland is effectively in the hands of the United States of America, and the corresponding agreements formally provide for Danish and Greenlandic participation in American military activities.

In a nutshell, Greenland's status is much simpler in legal and political terms than it is in terms of economics, geostrategy and defence. Legally, Danish autonomous territory has a clearly defined procedure for becoming an independent state. But the question is whether Greenland would be able to survive after the possible proclamation of independence. On the one hand, with the current level of income, Greenland is not financially independent and depends on Danish subsidies, and many of its citizens earn income from jobs in the European Union thanks to a Danish passport. On the other hand, Greenland's strategic position and its natural resources have always aroused the interest of major world powers (which in the case of the United States is undisguised), so the question arises whether Greenland's independence would be sustainable in the long run.

The recent elections, held in the atmosphere of Trump's annexation threat, showed that political parties in Greenland are taking a much more cautious approach to the option of quick independence than before. The victory of the Democrats in the elections, a party that has traditionally opposed independence and is now advocating a gradual and patient path



to independence, as well as the formation of a government that includes both supporters of independence and its opponents, are clear signals that Greenland's independence probably will not be declared soon, but will be well prepared. The latest polls have shown similar projections, since more than a half of Greenlanders said they do not expect Greenland to become an independent country in the short term, but only in a decade or two.

REFERENCES

- Act on Greenland Self-Government. <https://oxcon.oup.com/display/10.1093/law:ocw/cd1283.regGroup.1/law-ocw-cd1283?rskey=TPE7yh&result=43&prd=OXCON&print>
- Ackrén, M. (2022). Development of autonomy in Greenland – From home rule to self-government. *Autonomy Arrangements in the World* (2nd ed.). <https://doi.org/10.57749/T2FH-FY42>
- Beach, D. (2020). Referendums in Denmark influence on politics. In P. M. Christiansen, J. Elklit, & P. Nedergaard (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of Danish politics* (pp. 400–416). Oxford University Press.
- Brańka, T. (2018). Greenland – from autonomy to (in)dependence. *Przegląd Strategiczny*, (11), 107–128. <https://doi.org/10.14746/ps.2018.1.8>
- Constitution of Denmark. (1953). https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Denmark_1953
- De Vergotini, Đ. (2015). *Uporedno ustavno pravo*. Službeni glasnik.
- Gad, U. P. (2020). Greenland, the Faroe Islands, and Denmark: Unity or community? In P. M. Christiansen, J. Elklit, & P. Nedergaard (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of Danish politics* (pp. 28–45). Oxford University Press.
- Gautier, D. L., Bird, K. J., Charpentier, R. R., Grantz, A., Houseknecht, D. W., Klett, T. R., Moore, T. E., Pitman, J. K., Schenk, C. J., Schuenemeyer, J. H., Sørensen, K., Tennyson, M. E., Valin, Z. C., & Wandrey, C. J. (2009). Assessment of undiscovered oil and gas in the Arctic, *Science*, 324(5931). <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1169467>
- Greenland forms new government hours before visit by US Vice President Vance. (2025, Mars 28). *Rappler*. <https://www.rappler.com/world/europe/greenland-forms-new-government-before-jd-vance-visit/>
- Jensen, J. A. (2003). The position of Greenland and the Faroe Islands within the Danish realm. *European Public Law*, 9(2), 170–178. <https://doi.org/10.54648/euro2003014>
- Marković, G. (2023). Kovačević v. Bosnia and Herzegovina: Do federalism and consociation matter? *NBP. Nauka, bezbednost, policija*, 28(3), 2–18. <https://doi.org/10.5937/nabepo28-47970>
- Nikolić, P. (1993). *Ustavno pravo*. Službeni list SRJ.
- Orlović, S. P. (2024). The parallelism of Serbian constitutional norms on the concept and competences of autonomies. *NBP. Nauka, bezbednost, policija*, 29(3), 170–190. <https://doi.org/10.5937/nabepo29-50926>



Palermo, F., & Kössler, K. (2017). *Comparative federalism: Constitutional arrangements and case law*. Hart Publishing.

Petrov, V., & Stanković, M. (2020). *Ustavno pravo*. Pravni fakultet Univerziteta u Beogradu.

Simović, D. (2005). *Kanadski federalizam* [MA thesis, University of Belgrade Faculty of Law].

Simović, D., Stanković, M., & Petrov, V. (2018). *Ljudska prava*. Pravni fakultet Univerziteta u Beogradu.

Stanković, M. (2020). *Preobražaji federalne države*. Pravni fakultet Univerziteta u Beogradu.

Euractiv. (2025). *Virtually no Greenlanders want to join the US, new poll finds*. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/virtually-no-greenlander-wants-to-join-the-us-poll-finds/>

Yeung, J. & Kent, L. (2025, March 12). Greenland's center-right opposition wins closely watched election dominated by Trump's annexation threat. *CNN*. <https://edition.cnn.com/2025/03/12/europe/greenland-election-polls-close-demokraatit-intl-hnk/index.html>

