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Economic (in)dependence of Arctic indigenous peoples on the example of Greenlanders

Introduction

All of the indigenous peoples of the Arctic constitute a minority in the countries they live in. Also, they have no real chances of forming their own state. This also applies to the Greenlandic Inuit people, who are currently enjoying broader autonomy, and in practice, they govern the island they inhabit, and the fact that they are still, along with the Faroe Islands, part of the Kingdom of Denmark is the result of their own sovereign decision. There are some independence movements within every indigenous community, but these do not have any dominant influence on it. In most cases, it is pragmatism that prevails. Indeed, it should be taken into account that few micronations are able to effectively govern the territories they inhabit. This is particularly true of the Arctic, whose natural resources are becoming increasingly accessible as a result of climate warming. It is, therefore, only natural that the world's largest and most energy-intensive economies are beginning to take an interest in these resources. Non-democratic states also have their interests in the Arctic, while frequently being focused merely on the exploitation of new territories. It can, therefore, be assumed that gaining their own state by indigenous peoples would ultimately lead to destruction of their culture. Considering the fact that ice, which is more than 2 km deep, covers almost the whole island, Greenland and its inhabitants are a special case of the situation of indigenous peoples. The melting Greenland ice sheet may in future lead to an intensification of attempts to take control of the island and of its rich natural resources. It, therefore, seems worthwhile to analyze the situation of the indigenous peoples of Greenland and their quality of life in the context of the growing demand for scarce natural resources and the dynamically changing geopolitical situation.

The issues of self-determination of the indigenous people of Greenland in the context of globalization, the warming of the Arctic and the increasing demand for resources have been studied by several scientists. For example, Mark Nuttall, who draws attention to the large dynamics resulting from globalization changes taking place in the Arctic (Nuttall, 2020). In turn, Frank Sejersen points out that Greenlanders' sentiment

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for independence is fuelled by China, whose real goal is to take control of Greenland's resources (Sejersen, 2020). The impact of raw materials on the future of indigenous peoples of the Arctic was described by Hanna Lempinen and Marjo Lindroth (Lempinen, Lindroth, 2021).

However, this article allows to look at the issue of Greenland's independence in a non-bipolar way, where only independence or dependence exists. Indeed, the case of Greenland shows that in the case of small nations, limiting self-determination is much more beneficial than full independence.

Historical background

Today, most of Greenland is covered in ice; however, owing to current analyses of the oldest DNA samples collected in Greenland, proofs have been found that between 800,000 and 450,000 years ago much of this island was green with boreal forests (taiga). The temperature varied from -17°C in winter to 10°C in summer (Than, 2007). Over successive thousands of years, the global climate changed several times and life on Earth evolved. When humans entered North America about 14,000 years ago, half of the continent was covered with ice sheets (Haynes, 2002: 1). At that time, Greenland was at the end of the last glacial era (Cowie, 2013: 132). Thus, the natural conditions did not allow for settlement in that area and first humans entering North America set off in southerly directions.

The oldest settlements in Greenland known as of today date back to 2,500 B.C. They are supposed to have belonged to Inuit tribes that arrived from the north-west direction. Probably, the last group of those tribes came to Greenland about 1,000 A.D. Today, about 80% of Greenlanders are the descendants of those immigrants. When the last Inuit tribes were coming to Greenland, the island started to be populated by Vikings (Sørensen, 1995: 85). They were able to cover the distance from Scandinavia to Iceland and from Iceland to Greenland because in those times the climate was warmer and northern ship routes were ice-free all year round (Behringer, 2010: 83). The Vikings accidentally found their way to Greenland probably when a storm-tossed ship was thrown off its course from Norway to Iceland (Logan, 1991: 71).

The Norse settlement is believed to have existed in Greenland approximately for 500 years, i.e., from the end of the 10th century to the end of the Late Middle Ages (Hagland, 2005: 1234). The last recorded trip from Norse Greenland took place in 1410 (Seaver, 1996: 2). The Greenland settlement is a historical fact that cannot be doubted, yet the reason why it vanished remains unknown. That might have been caused by the Black Death or Inuit who attacked the Nordic colonies (Leacock, 2015: 53). All the theories attempting to account for the end of the medieval Scandinavian colonies in Greenland have never been entirely successful (McGovern, 1981: 404).

After the extinction of the first Norse Greenlanders, contacts between the island and Europe were sporadic. However, during all of the 16th and the 17th centuries, the Kings

of Denmark considered Greenland to be under their domination (Czapliński, Górski, 1965: 376). In 1721, the king, Frederic IV, sent pastor Hans Egede to Greenland to convert and trade with the Inuit population (Sebro, 2008: 84). By the end of the 18th century, the Danish mission and trade station had been established along the coast of West Greenland and, in the beginning of the 20th century, whole island became a Danish colony (Grønnow, Jensen, 2007: 180). At that time, a climate warming trend extended ranges of ice-free areas and brought on an increase in commercial fishing around the island (Dams, 1996: 365).

During World War I, Denmark and Greenland remained neutral. The situation changed during World War II. Denmark declared neutrality again, but despite this fact German troops began to occupy this state on April 9, 1940 (Czapliński, Górski, 1965: 368-367). Thus, Greenland was separated from continental Denmark (Sørensen, 2006: 63). The population of the island needed supplies as well as a market for its perishable goods. Previously, all trade had been with Denmark so the governors had to seek relationships with Canada and the United States (Sørensen, 2006: 63-64).

When the Germans invaded Norway, they were able to take the northern route to Greenland so the strategic interest in this island grew (Sørensen, 2006: 62-63). In the late 1940, a decision was taken that the USA ought to establish military bases in Greenland (Lidegaard, 2009: 153). Despite its remoteness and harsh climate, during World War II, Greenland was of a considerable significance (*Greenland during World War II*, 2020). Thus, in 1940, the United States took over responsibility for defending Greenland. A number of military installations were constructed (Cooke, Horton, Jorgensen, 2005: 302). Some of the US Air Force bases built there at that time exist today (Smallman-Raynor, Cliff, 2006: 401). Today, two of them constitute the only gateways to Greenland: Kangerlussuaq in the west and Narsarsuaq in the south. Paradoxically, the economic conditions of Greenland clearly improved during the war. Trading prices for fish and fishing-related products almost doubled, and Greenland grew economically (Beukel, Jensen, Rytter, 2010: 30).

Towards the end of the colonial era, in the 1950s, there was a tendency to transform colonies into other geopolitical entities; their status bore the stamp of quasi-autonomy, and it was designed to mask the colonial nature of ruling. Different metropolises would use different nomenclatures. Denmark, in 1953, renamed it to be a metropolitan province. In turn, in 1979, Greenland was transformed into an autonomous country. Later on, however, Greenland chose to hold a referendum in which the inhabitants of the island opted for further connection with the metropolis as an “autonomous state” of Denmark with its full internal self-government and even partial international powers. Defence and finance were then left to Denmark. Greenland, in its total freedom, decided to leave the European Community in 1982, and on January 1, 1985, it was granted the status of an associated overseas territory. In turn, on June 21, 2009, it extended its sov-

foreign powers to cover thirty areas, leaving only foreign policy to Denmark (Tomala, 2019: 109-110).

Greenlanders as the indigenous people of the Arctic

The concept of indigenous peoples is not clearly defined in literature or in international law. It seems that in the case of analyses concerning indigenous peoples in the Arctic, the most accurate one is that cited after Piotr Daranowski:

Indigenous communities are those which constitute a historical continuation of the pre-invasion and colonial communities established in their territory, and who consider themselves to be a separate entity from any other parts of society currently dominating that territory or its part. Being a non-dominant part of the community, they are determined to preserve, develop and pass onto future generations their inherited territories and their ethnic identity as a foundation for the continuation of their being as a people, in conformity with its cultural patterns, social institutions and legal order [...].

On an individual level, an indigenous person is one who belongs to an indigenous population following their self-identification as such (group consciousness) and one who is recognised and accepted by that population as one of their members (group's acceptance). These communities enjoy their sovereign right and power to decide who belongs to their circle, with an exclusion of any external pressures (Daranowski, 2014: 144).

Lifestyles, cultural identities, beliefs and even languages are derived from the natural conditions in which they were formed. The interplay between culture and nature is obvious and undeniable. Many scholars relate culture to nature when defining it. Yehudi Cohen even defines culture as an extension of human physiology and the most important tool of human adaptation and mastery over nature (Cohen, 1968: 46-62). On the other hand, the view of culture according to Robert L. Carnerio emphasizes more that culture is a kind of intermediary introduced by man between themselves and nature in order to ensure their security and survival (Carnerio, 1979: 551-554). This is particularly noticeable in areas that are geographically peripheral and located in extreme climatic conditions (Krupocin, Krupocin, 2020: 1-2). Thus, when attempting to analyze the cultural changes in relation to the indigenous peoples of Greenland, this should be done in the context of the natural environment and its changes. It also needs to be taken into account whether and how the Inuit lifestyle affected their natural environment (Sadowski, 2008: 129).

The Arctic is one of the least populated locations in the world but despite the harsh natural conditions people have lived in the area for at least 5,000 years. Throughout history, many Arctic communities have disappeared, and new ones have appeared in their place. People were forced to lead nomadic lifestyle while following migrating animals, including marine and land mammals, birds and fish. It was this synchronization of one's lifestyle with the rhythms of nature that the survival of the Arctic communities depended on (Skytt, 2020).

The first inhabitants of the Arctic areas developed climate-adapted and highly specialized technologies. Settling in areas from the north-eastern tip of Siberia by the Bering Strait, through Alaska and Canada to Greenland, they had to adapt their way of life to the natural conditions. To ensure their survival, they learned how to exploit natural resources while settling usually on the edges of the tundra and the sea (Nationalmuseet, 2021).

Nowadays, the Arctic indigenous peoples include, e.g. Saami in the circumpolar areas of Finland, Sweden, Norway and Northwest Russia, Nenets, Khanty, Evenk and Chukchi in Russia, Aleut, Yupik and Inuit (Iñupiat) in Alaska, Inuit (Inuvialuit) in Canada and Inuit (Kalaallit) in Greenland. All of the above-mentioned countries except for Iceland have indigenous peoples living within their Arctic territories. Official statistics do not necessarily recognize indigenous populations separately although differences occur. The



Figure 1. Indigenous peoples of Arctic
Source: Arctic Centre (2019).

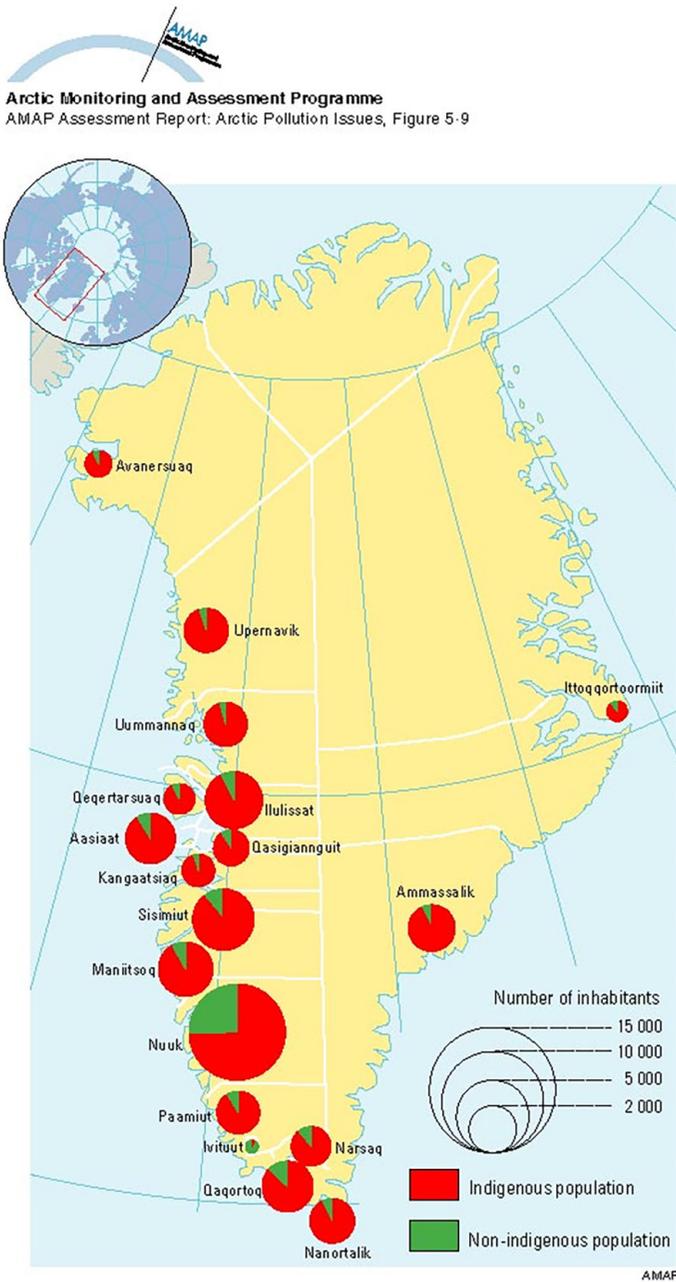


Figure 2. Total and indigenous populations of Greenland, by municipality
 Source: Working Group of the Arctic Council (2007).

number of indigenous people is not accurate considering the definition of indigenoussness (Arctic Centre, 2022).

When analyzing the situation of the indigenous people of Greenland, it is important to note that they constitute the majority of the population of the country (and not the state) they inhabit. As of January 1, 2021, the population of Greenland was 56,421 (Statista, 2021). Of these, more than 14,000 live in Nuuk (Greenland's capital). The second largest city is Sisimiut (5,300), followed by Ilulissat (4,500) and Qaqortoq (3,200). In addition to these four centres located on the west coast, there are another 18 towns and 120 villages where the rest of the population live (Statistics Greenland, 2021).

At the same time, the indigenous Greenlanders enjoy the greatest autonomy from among all of the peoples of the Arctic. However, there are no indications that the Greenlanders would want to break away from Denmark and declare independence in the near future. The international rivalry in the Arctic makes the Greenlanders realize that they are a micronation inhabiting a huge area, and their potential does not allow them to build any armed forces that would guarantee their territorial integrity and supervision of an exclusive economic zone. Considering the international situation, the majority of Greenlanders express a desire to maintain the union with Denmark, which provides a greater sense of stability and security (Szymański, 2021). In the current situation in Greenland, there is no economy that would allow the island to be economically independent.

Greenland's economy and economic potential

As commonly understood, the Arctic is the area around the North Pole. However, depending on the context, there are different definitions of this geographical area. It can be defined as the area north of the north polar circle (66° 33' N), which is also the southern boundary of the polar night and day phenomena. Other definitions refer to the Arctic as an area with a polar climate. This means that the average temperature in the warmest month (July) does not exceed 10°C. It is also the northern boundary for the occurrence of trees (Skytt, 2020).

The climate in the Arctic is characterized by frosty winters and cool summers. In most areas of the Arctic, precipitation is in the form of snow. The average temperature in winter is ca. -32°C, and in summer this is ca. -10°C. Large portions of the Arctic are permanently covered with ice. This includes the Greenland's ice sheet, large areas of north-eastern Canada and Alaska, as well as the Norwegian and Russian islands in the Arctic Ocean (Skytt, 2020).

For the purpose of this article, in terms of how they are used, the natural resources of the Arctic may be divided into energy resources (hydrocarbon deposits) and mineral resources, which include rare-earth elements. These elements are essential in the construction of renewable energy sources, modern weapon systems, mobile phones, batteries, and all electronics in a broad sense. It is estimated that the world's largest unexploited

deposits of these metals are located in Greenland (Sawicki, 2021). Estimates in relation to the hydrocarbon potential (oil and gas resources) of the Arctic, carried out by various scientific centres, are divergent. Nevertheless, each time they indicate large numbers. It is estimated that under the bottom of the Arctic Ocean, there are 25-30% of the world's natural gas resources and 10-15% of crude oil (Ciechanowska, 2012: 1178-1179). This causes the world's fastest growing and most energy-intensive economies to take an increasing interest in the Arctic's resources.

The increased interest in this region is mainly due to the global climate change, particularly evident in the Arctic regions including Greenland. The climate warming contributes to the opening of sea routes and to the exposure of previously inaccessible mineral resources. It should be noted that Greenland consists mainly of ice sheets, which cover as much as 80 to 85% of the surface of the whole island. Therefore, considering the increase in temperatures and melting of glaciers, in the coming decades, there is a rationale for states and international corporations exhibiting growing interest in the resources to be found on the island and in the potential connected with their exploitation (Tomala, 2019: 107).

Greenland's economy is typical of Arctic regions, and it should be considered in the context of business development based on the specific geographical and climatic conditions associated with the Arctic. Firstly, the economy is based on the exploitation of natural resources mainly by hunting and fishing. There is no real industrial sector. The exploitation of mineral resources plays a marginal role in Greenland's economy today. However, the economic potential for the exploitation of raw materials is quite large and, in the future, this could constitute a significant source of income for the Greenlandic population. Secondly, Greenland has a large public sector, which in many ways dominates the economy. Greenlandic society is based on the Scandinavian welfare model, and it offers a wide range of services to the population. This does not only concern the ongoing costs of maintaining a high level of welfare, which will put pressure on the country's financial balance in the future. Thirdly, the labour market is small, fragmented and spread over a large geographical area, even though there is a relative concentration around larger cities.

Economically, Greenland is not able to support itself. To balance the budget, Greenlanders receive block grants from Denmark of approximately DKK 3.6 billion each year. Greenland has been receiving block grants since it gained autonomy in 1979. The assumption is that Denmark will continue to offer block grants to Greenland until the Greenlanders are able to balance their budget without compromising the functioning of the welfare state. At the same time, Greenland has an annual foreign trade deficit of about \$430 million. Most of the exports, 87% of which consist of fishery products, go to Denmark, Japan and China. Imported goods, in turn, include mainly machinery and means of transport, processed goods, foodstuff and fuels. These mostly come from Denmark,

Sweden and the United Kingdom (*Grønland er afhængig af bloktilskud fra Danmark*, 2022). Therefore, Greenland has economic ties with Europe as well with Japan and China.

Conclusions

The Greenlandic Inuit enjoy the greatest autonomy of all the indigenous inhabitants of the Arctic. They govern their territory. However, they have no demographic or economic potential to be able to form and manage their own state without compromising the living standards. Being part of the Kingdom of Denmark, they receive subsidies to ensure the functioning of their welfare state. At the same time, they are not able to control the territory of Greenland and its exclusive economic zone on their own. One may even state that they are too small and too weak to be able to function independently in the international arena. However, their cultural identity is not currently threatened in any way by this. The Greenlandic language (or rather Greenlandic languages) is the official language of the island. Although it is written in the Latin alphabet, it possesses its own orthography. It may seem paradoxical, but it is precisely Greenland's lack of independence that allows the preservation of the national and cultural identity of the indigenous inhabitants of the island. Obviously enough, preserving identity is not solely related to the continuation of a traditional way of life but also to its evolution with the changing environment.

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Abstract: Climate warming is causing ice in the circumpolar zones to melt, making it easier to access the natural resources there. It is not only individual states but also international corporations that are seeking to take control of these deposits. In the vast majority of cases, the indigenous inhabitants of the Arctic have little influence over the exploitation of the deposits. This is due to the economic and political superiority of the authorities of the countries they live in. Very frequently, even their autonomy is only apparent, and it concerns merely a few aspects of economic activity. It is only in the case of the Inuit living in Greenland that the situation is different. They have real control over their own territories. They have a wide autonomy within the Kingdom of Denmark and no option of Greenland gaining independence would be beneficial for them. The article constitutes an attempt to analyze the possibility of their economic independence.

Keywords: Arctic, indigenous peoples, Greenland, Kingdom of Denmark, natural resources, international politics

Article submitted: 5.02.2022; article accepted: 10.04.2022.

