

# Faroese Autonomy in the Crystal Ball: The Growing Gap Between Faroese Political Culture and Danism Legalism

## Introduction

In recent decades, the political culture of the Faroe Islands has evolved significantly. There has been a widening of political perspectives, leading to greater unity across political parties in the push for a more active international role and rethinking the islands' relationship with Denmark. This development contrasts sharply with Denmark's more static, legalistic interpretations of the Danish Realm's constitution. The article explores this tension and its growing implications for the foreign policy of the Faroe Islands.

## The Turning Point: Foreign Policy Aspirations and Legal Friction

Two major cases in 2024–2025 reflect a shift in Faroese political culture. The first is the Faroese desire to become an independent member of the World Trade Organization (WTO), which led for the first time to the invocation of the dispute resolution body outlined in Section 6 of the Home Rule Act. The second involves the potential for full Faroese and Greenlandic membership in the Nordic Council, which is being revisited as part of a two-year revision of the Helsinki Agreement.

These cases exemplify a wider cultural and political shift: increased calls for international participation are not coming from a separatist fringe but are becoming mainstream across all Faroese political parties. Even the traditionally unionist Sambandsflokkurin proposed a plan titled “*Nýtt Samband*” (New Union), aimed at reforming the relationship with Denmark to allow for more foreign policy autonomy while maintaining ties with the Danish kingdom.

## A Widening Gap Between Cultural and Formal Sovereignty

The crux of the issue lies in a growing dissonance between Faroese aspirations and Denmark's legal framework. While Faroese political actors increasingly view themselves as autonomous international players, the Danish legal position remains that the Faroe Islands are not a sovereign entity and thus cannot independently join international organizations.

This was made starkly clear in April 2024, when the Swedish Minister for Nordic Cooperation, Jessica Roswall, publicly dismissed the idea of full Faroese membership in the Nordic Council, even as a guest of the Faroese government. Her blunt rejection symbolized the barriers Faroese actors face due to their ambiguous constitutional status within the Danish Realm.

Faroese politicians across the spectrum responded with frustration. Prime Minister Aksel V. Johannesen called the comment a reminder of the foreign policy “straitjacket” the Faroes are in. Meanwhile, even unionist voices began calling for fundamental changes in the Danish-Faroese relationship.

## Political Consensus and Cultural Legitimacy

What marks the current moment as unique is the breadth of political agreement in the Faroe Islands. Nearly all parties now agree that the current arrangement is inadequate. The traditionally unionist Sambandsflokkurin has shifted its rhetoric from warning against creeping independence to advocating for a reform of the Kingdom of Denmark's structure.

This change reflects a deeper transformation in Faroese political culture. Historically, pivotal political changes (like the 1946 independence referendum and the 1948 Home Rule Act) were rooted in cultural movements. Similarly, today's calls for autonomy stem from a strengthened sense of national identity, supported by economic growth, improved connectivity, sporting and cultural achievements, and administrative capacity.

## The Normalization of the Independence Discourse

Since the 2000s, the Faroes have gained control over several policy areas through sectoral takeovers. While some transfers, like the one of pandemic legislation during COVID-19, were initiated by unionist politicians, they were widely accepted with minimal controversy—suggesting a normalization of self-rule.

Moreover, new diplomatic missions have been established in Washington, Beijing, Tel Aviv, and Moscow—again, with support across the political spectrum. These embassies signal the Faroes' growing global outlook and reinforce the legitimacy of an independent foreign policy.

## Danish Formalism vs. Faroese Progressivism

Despite progress in the Faroes, the Danish approach remains largely formalist and static. The Danish Ministry of Justice and other governmental bodies continue to rely on narrow constitutional interpretations that offer little room for evolving autonomy.

This rigidity increasingly contrasts with the Faroese view of themselves as an emerging international actor. The legal ambiguity of the Kingdom of Denmark's internal structure has become a stumbling block for Faroese international ambitions. This contradiction is now so sharp that many observers believe significant change is inevitable. Something's gotta give!

## Danish Voices for Reform

Not all Danes are resistant to change. Some prominent Danish politicians and diplomats have voiced concerns about the sustainability of the current arrangement. Former minister Bertel Haarder has argued that the Realm no longer fits the realities of the modern world, and that the constitution does not reflect the distinct needs of the Faroese and Greenlandic peoples. He proposes recognizing both entities as sovereign states while preserving a cooperative framework.

Similarly, former NATO ambassador Michael Zilmer-Johns declared at a 2023 conference that the current union is obsolete and suggested a new model involving three independent states cooperating on selected areas like defense and currency.

These perspectives primarily represent a worry about Danish influence in the West Nordic region, and a growing realization among a few Danish political insiders that failing to adapt may result in a loss of both Greenland and the Faroe Islands—an echo of historical Danish losses of Norway, Iceland, and territories in Sweden and Germany.

## Strategic Importance and International Pressure

The Faroe Islands and especially Greenland is key to Denmark's geopolitical influence. Greenland's role in Arctic and security policy has become more prominent, particularly in the wake of President Donald Trump's controversial remarks in early 2025 about removing Denmark's control over Greenland. This geopolitical attention places further strain on the Kingdom's internal structure, exposing its fragility.

In contrast to Greenland's strategic leverage, the Faroes have independently taken concrete steps toward full sovereignty over the past two decades. Both cases highlight the inadequacy of the current legal-political framework to accommodate shifting realities.

## Toward a New Foreign Policy Chapter

Faroese foreign policy is at a crossroads. Political ambitions rooted in an evolving sense of self-governance are clashing with outdated constitutional frameworks. A change is not only likely but necessary.

The coming years are expected to bring major shifts in the Faroe Islands' international role. Whether through constitutional reform, gradual disintegration of the current Realm, or the creation of a new cooperative model, Faroese foreign policy is about to enter a new chapter—one marked by increased autonomy and direct engagement with the international community.

## Final Reflections

This article has described a small nation's evolving identity and its growing discontent with the constraints of a larger constitutional framework. The conclusion is that culture, law, and international relations intertwine in the contemporary push for sovereignty—not necessarily through rupture, but potentially through creative reimagining of interdependence.

The Faroe Islands, like many micronations, are trying to find their own voice in a world where sovereignty is increasingly dynamic. The outcome may be a more independent Faroese foreign policy rooted in consensus, capability, and culture.