S. Spiliopoulou Åkermark (ed.)


When one mentions the Åland Islands in casual conversation, the reaction is usually muted. Observant Nordic travellers may recall the archipelago as a brief stopover on one of the numerous ferries plying the Stockholm-Helsinki route. Non-Nordics may be hard-pressed to place the islands in Europe. And even the next-door neighbour Swedes sometimes having a hard time recalling whether Åland is Swedish, Finnish or something else entirely. The sole exception to this rule involves international lawyers. No matter where they hail from, the eyes of this rarefied group light up at the mention. Europe’s sole demilitarised, neutralised autonomy with minority rights protections? Based on the famous 1921 League of Nations decision? I read all about them, do they really exist?

They do exist, albeit on a demographic scale that belies their political significance. The Åland Islands ‘regime’ was developed in the service of a surprisingly small and rural population of Swedish-speakers inhabiting a scattered Finnish archipelago strategically placed at the centre of the Baltic Sea. Even among Finland’s relatively small Swedish-speaking minority, the Ålanders account for a fraction – some 10 per cent of 265,000 souls. And yet, given the scope of this international law regime and its duration, the Ålanders have arguably wrought in Finland one of the world’s most lopsided federal states, with one unit comprising five million people ruled from Helsinki, and the other comprising only 26,000 ruled from the provincial capital of Mariehamn. By any scale, the Åland regime – comprising both its autonomy and minority rights scheme and its security arrangements – punches well above its weight.

The specific solutions adopted to the dual problems of accommodating cultural difference and meeting regional security needs have also stood the test of time, fostering nearly a century of stable self-government on Åland and an even longer period during which the archipelago has not figured significantly in any of the conflicts that have swept through the region. As such, Åland has become something of a showcase for Nordic conflict management and toleration. This has led to a great temptation to seek lessons from Åland in addressing
the numerous ethnic conflicts that continue to flare up in the wake of the Cold War – as well as a risk that such efforts will fall flat for having failed to take into account the unique contextual factors that allowed the Åland regime to prosper.

A notable contribution of the recent volume published by the Åland Islands Peace Institute\(^1\) is that it highlights Åland’s continued relevance to conflict management while getting at a number of neglected but essential elements of the Åland regime. First, it points out the centrality of the security components of the Åland regime to a successful package of measures including the better-known autonomy and language protection rules. Second, it places both the rules and the institutions that have undergirded the Åland regime in regional and historical context, emphasising the futility of any effort to replicate the entire package in any other setting, but reframing its relevance as both a flexible Nordic smorgasbord of components – and a source of inspiration. And finally, the authors emphasise the dynamic political process that has facilitated the adaptation of the substantive elements of the regime to changing circumstances in the region and beyond.

1 **Evolution of an Autonomy**

The Åland Islands are an archipelago stretching from south-western Finland across the Baltic Sea toward the Swedish mainland. Although there are longstanding commercial and cultural ties with nearby Stockholm, Åland was administered as a part of Finland during the four centuries that Finland was an integrated part of Sweden. As a result, when Finland fell to Russia in 1809, Åland travelled with it. Given its strategic significance at the crossroads of the Baltic and within striking distance of Stockholm, Åland was fortified by the Russians and became the northernmost theatre of the Crimean War. After the conflict, the Russians were forced to accede to an 1856 Convention prohibiting any fortification of the islands.\(^2\)

As Finland’s Swedish-speaking elite faced the prospect of permanent integration into Russia (albeit initially as a Grand Duchy with an unusually high

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2 Convention on the Demilitarization of the Åland Islands (1856). This treaty, along with the others that undergird the Åland regime can be accessed at a database maintained by the Åland Culture Foundation: <http://www.kulturstiftelsen.ax/traktater/eng_fr/ram_right-enfr.htm>.