



The Åland Islands: Neither local nor fully sovereign

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Abstract

The Åland Islands received their co-sovereign standing from the League of Nations in 1921, the settlement of a Finnish–Swedish dispute. The clash was over ownership, and the league advocated that Åland should remain part of Finland, albeit elevated to the status of a self-governing polity. The verdict implied that Finland's sovereignty was significantly compromised, whereas the islands landed in an in-between situation, being neither local nor fully sovereign. The duality of Åland – remaining an integral part of Finland yet still distinct with a standing of its own, including various cultural and linguistic safeguards – meant more generally that the islands fall through the interstices of the dominant discourses pertaining to political space. However, the lack of any clear conceptual standing has not amounted to anything profoundly disadvantageous. Their liminal nature of being neither this nor that has instead furnished the islands with a rather favourable posture. Their standing, although initially perceived as a loss and still seen in some interventions as unwarranted and viewed as a source of ontological uncertainty, arguably accounts for their ability to transform what usually appears as weakness into a considerable degree of influence. The article thus aims to explore what explains such an outcome and the manner in which the ambiguity of the islands has stood the test of time, taking into account that their standing has, among other things, been impacted by Finland and the islands both joining the EU in 1995 and the sovereignty games involved.

Keywords

Autonomy, conflict resolution, co-sovereignty, EU-membership, liminality

Introduction

The Åland Islands are easy to define in some respects: they constitute a small and peripheral but rather affluent community of some 28,000 inhabitants scattered across an archipelago consisting of more than 6500 islands located in the northern Baltic Sea between Finland and Sweden.

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Yet Åland seems to evade most of the standard definitions premised on some taken-for-granted sense of normalcy. This is evidenced in one sense by how Åland is primarily defined by what it is *not*. Standard concepts such as those of state, nation, people, region or minority are not fully applicable, and at the same time Åland is clearly more than just a local entity. It is part of Finland, but not altogether Finnish; nor is it possible to categorize the islands as Swedish despite their rather strong and recently strengthened cultural affinity with Sweden. Despite being local, they also have a forceful international and European anchorage. They have been demilitarized and neutralized, granted extensive self-rule and more recently also allowed to join the EU, albeit on special conditions.

In general, the Åland Islands are between and betwixt. They are difficult to categorize in any clear-cut terms, this elusiveness in turn raising questions about their nature and whether they really exist as a polity. Mikael Ekman (2000: 8) hence notes that defining the islands in standard conceptual terms ‘gives rise to sensitive issues’, and therefore simply settles for the use of the term ‘Åland’. Still another evasive approach pointing out the fragility and identity-related insecurity consists of the application of terms such as ‘archipelago’ or ‘Realm of Islands’ (*ö-riket*) in defining and forging the essence of the islands. For Bjarne Lindström (2000: 107), the islands boil down to ‘a home rule territory with many peculiarities’.

The islands generally constitute a rather special type of entity in having frequently been sorted out in an innovative manner, this then demonstrating that sovereignty does not have to be an all-or-nothing game. Their special character is exemplified by, among other things, Åland being represented in the Nordic Council and able to influence decisions on matters affecting the islands quite directly in the Nordic Council of Ministers (Naucmér, 2005). As to the EU, Åland has been able to carve out special arrangements in the context of joining the union. More generally, it has been treated in an exceptional manner by various external actors, above all Finland and Sweden, this then turning the islands into anomalies within the broader political landscape. Notably, they themselves have also gradually contributed to their standing, being called on occasion ‘post-sovereign’ (Lindström, 1999: 84). Åland displays, in fact, a considerable subjectivity despite its rather remote location, small size and limited resources. Over time – despite having initially aspired to a return to their position as a local Swedish community – the islands have been able to evade the usual constraints placed upon not fully sovereign, small and peripheral entities in international relations. Once constituted as subjects with the power to act, the islands have rather competently exercised that power as indicated, among other things, by their well anchored international standing and nature as a rather affluent community.

A key question raised in this paper hence consists of how to account for their ambiguity and ability to elude and slip through the network of classifications and departures that normally arrest and locate small, peripheral entities in political science and international relations. What games have transformed their apparent weakness into strength? And, moreover, why are they tolerated, if not rewarded, despite their conceptual dislocation, disturbing and anti-structural qualities as well as transgressing and undermining of the categorical distinctions – including those pertaining to sovereignty – that usually inform and impact how political space is expected to unfold? Despite its deviant and in some sense also threatening nature regarding the customary ways of organizing political space,

Åland appears to have been able to capitalize on its ambiguous nature of being partly self, partly other. It has done so by being neither a standard local entity nor a fully sovereign polity on the international scene but also by being able to move, it seems, beyond the usual choices advanced by mainstream International Relations theory of either subordination or ‘going sovereign’. Furthermore, the aim is to explore how the ambiguity that is integrally part of Åland’s position has stood the test of time and been influenced by the sovereignty-games unfolding within the EU.

In searching for departures allowing and accounting for entities stretching beyond the usual binaries and self–other distinctions, the concept of ‘liminality’ appears to be quite applicable. It allows for an extended (self–liminal–other) conceptualization of political subjectivity and, more generally, for the exploration of conditions in which customary structures are dislocated, hierarchies reversed and traditional settings of power and authority derailed. Crucially, the concept of liminality is quite conducive to the analysis of cases not easily framed through the construction of a simple topographical opposition of inside–outside in the context of sovereign states. The concept generally refers to the quality of an entity that has entered the period of transfer from the original site to a new one as well as the quality of the transition process itself (see Frello, 2006; Rumelili, 2012; Szakolczai, 2009).

In crossing categories usually presumed to be mutually exclusive and incompatible, the islands seem to be quite susceptible to a reading premised on their liminal being. In the first place, the islands fall through the interstices of the discourses pertaining to Europeanization, but they are also liminal as regards the sovereignty of the metropole as well as the standard discourses on sovereignty more generally. This duality and crack in the dominant discourses on political space allows them, I assert, to turn their ambiguity into an asset. What usually figures as a weakness and takes the shape of a perilous state of affairs in generating conflict and disorder can also be turned into a rather advantageous posture through creative agency. As a threshold case, Åland appears to provide an interesting testing ground and a minor ‘social laboratory’ for contesting the alleged fixity of key conceptual departures such as sovereignty, the identities at stake and a problematizing of the divisive effects of borders. Located on the fringes of the current international system but still not to be approached as peripheral or regarded merely site-specifically and hence as trivial in any broader perspective, it allows for the critical scrutiny of mainstream IR theory and in that context the conceptual departures as well as practices generally applied in the constitution of political space.

Imperial legacies: From an outpost to a bridge

The background for the unique status of the Åland Islands can be traced back to when Sweden relinquished the islands in 1809 to the Russian Empire as a consequence of a lost war. Prior to becoming part of an empire and – thereby also drawn into the sphere of struggles between European empires – Åland basically remained a somewhat peripheral and local part of Sweden. The position of the islands changed considerably in the sense that they grew in significance. On the one hand, they turned into an outpost; on the other, they functioned as a bridge between Tsarist Russia and the more central parts of Europe. The features of an outpost were well exemplified by the fortification of Bomarsund, one

of the largest building projects undertaken in the Grand Duchy of Finland and part of the St Petersburg defence system (also securing Russia's access to the Baltic Sea and world oceans more generally), whereas the grandiose, St Petersburg-style Eckerö Post and Mail House testified to connections and interactions straddling the East–West borderline.

Crucially, Russia as a multicultural polity did not pursue colonial or particularly repressive policies on the islands. The Swedish language, for example, retained its position despite indicating the cultural otherness of the Ålanders. In general, local life was marginally impacted. Yet some fears prevailed among the local peasants, both because of the threat of Russification spearheaded by the presence of a considerable number of Russian soldiers, the spreading of Finnish national romanticism and the consequences of the bitter civil war waged in Finland in 1917. These fears – which were also present among other parts of the Swedish-speaking and primarily coastal population in Finland – seem to some extent to account for why thousands of Ålanders emigrated during that period to America (Kuvaja et al., 2008). In short, the islands did not aspire to be decolonized and add to their subjectivity; rather, they aspired to shed the particularity imposed upon them and return to their previous existence as an ontologically safe entity, part of Sweden.

Yet the Russian defeat in the Crimean War implied on one level that Åland was elevated above anything merely local and gained international features. Notably, the term 'neutralized', used in the 1856 Convention between France, England and Russia, did not grant the islands any subjectivity of their own in the sense that they would have become a neutral actor. Rather, it implied that they, as a geographically limited domain, were exempted from military activities. The single operative article of the convention stipulates that the islands 'are not to be fortified, nor shall any facility of a military or naval nature be retained or erected' (Ahlström, 1995: 28). With the Bomarsund fortification having been destroyed in 1884 by a French–English naval force, Russia was prohibited from re-erecting it or using the islands more generally for any permanent military endeavours. The preservation of such a state of affairs became particularly important for Sweden and the pursuit of Swedish politics.

Given that the islands had been integrated, as part of the Grand Duchy of Finland, into imperial Russia in 1809, the question of belonging re-emerged with full force with the demise of Tsarist Russia and Finland gaining independence in 1917. The First World War had already put Åland on the agenda of the major European powers, with Russia having erected military installations and stationed troops on the islands during the war (without evoking the 1856 Convention). Yet it was primarily the activities of the Ålanders themselves that created the so-called 'Åland question' (e.g. Joenniemi, 2003). Instead of remaining in the in-between situation and dual identity of being Swedish-speaking yet part of Finland, they aspired to full re-unification with Sweden. A secessionist movement developed – with considerable support from Sweden – as they felt themselves to be part of the Swedish nation in terms of identity. The feeling was therefore that their lost unity had to be restored (Barros, 1968; Rotkirch, 1986: 365; Wahlbäck, 2011: 243).

Instead of simply rejecting the Ålandish worries, the Finnish authorities responded by attempting to reach a compromise. The solution offered entailed elements of flexibility, possibly because Finland itself had also recently experienced ambiguity in terms of having existed as a nation but not a state within imperial Russia (Joenniemi, 2002: 193ff).

Hence, Finland adopted the Act on the autonomy of Åland (Jansson, 1997: 2). This compromise with respect to the country's sovereignty and acceptance of the islands as 'partly other' did not meet the approval of the Ålanders and calmed their desire to join Sweden. Finland then resorted to sending over some troops in order for the leaders of the movement to be detained, and Sweden in turn reacted by recalling its diplomats from Finland.

Instead of tackling the crisis in Finnish–Swedish relations head-on and working towards some either/or solution premised on undivided sovereignty, the issue was handed over to the League of Nations. Sweden initiated the process, with Finland initially remaining somewhat reserved, although the latter also opened up some action-space for the Ålanders to utilize, for example by rejecting the terms of autonomy offered by the Finnish metropole in the 1920 Autonomy Act and by endeavouring to impact the negotiations conducted in the context of the League of Nations in various ways.

A compromise was ultimately reached in 1921, furnishing the islands with a considerable degree of autonomy. The process was pushed more by Sweden than Finland, but it was eventually also accepted by the latter despite the infringements on its sovereignty. The league ruled that the islands were indeed part of Finland and should remain so, although the region and its inhabitants should be granted internationally guaranteed self-governance. As to Sweden, some of the mainly security-related concerns with various restrictions pertaining to the military use of the islands figured more prominently than re-integrating Åland. Sweden also aspired to refrain from exacerbating any tensions that could have potentially endangered Finland as a newly established nation-state. Hence, the establishment – through the utilization of some of the previous agreements that had historically regulated the status of the islands – of a regime incorporating elements of neutralization and demilitarization was in line with Sweden's interests. Such a solution implied, among other things, exemption of the Ålanders from obligatory conscription. Similarly, some of the territorial aspects of Finland's sovereignty were compromised by restraining any peacetime military activities on and in the vicinity of Åland.

Overall, the Ålanders had to remain part of Finland, although they did receive a legislative assembly and provincial government of their own. In terms of cultural rights and for the cultural homogeneity of the islands to be preserved, Finland guaranteed the right to use Swedish as the only official language (whereas Finland is constitutionally bilingual, with both Finnish and Swedish as national languages). The special character of the islands was further bolstered by the Ålanders being provided with a kind of regional citizenship in the form of a right to domicile, entitling them to enjoy and exercise several individual rights. As one aspect of the co-sovereignty of the islands, it was further decided that their Autonomy Act could not be amended – as part of the international guarantee – by the Finnish Parliament without the consent of the Åland Legislative Assembly. This also meant that international treaties affecting the autonomy of the islands required assembly approval.

More generally, the assembly has wide-ranging executive power within Åland's autonomy, spanning for example the fields of healthcare, education, agriculture, communications and culture. The distinctiveness of the islands is also emphasized by having a seat in the Finnish Parliament being reserved for an Ålandish representative. This is the only regionalist element in the Finnish Parliament. Likewise, the specificity of the islands has been accentuated by the fact that Åland has had a flag of its own since 1954, a

separate postage stamp since 1984 and its own postal administration since 2003. More recently, Ålandish license plates have been made and an internet suffix (ax) also delineates the islands as being distinct in the virtual world. Yet it may be noted that Åland has failed in some of its other efforts, such as minting their own coins, turning into a site for Internet gambling, aspirations for special legislation allowing the operation of casinos or establishing an Ålandish shipping registry.

‘Islands of Peace’

The ruling achieved through internationalization in the sense of handing over the conflict to the League of Nations has turned out to be rather successful. Finland included the islands in its military conduct of the Winter War with the Soviet Union in 1939–1940, although none of the parties to the 1921 Convention objected to this move. Finland and the Soviet Union agreed bilaterally in 1940 to a treaty in which Finland committed itself neither to demilitarize Åland nor to allow any external power to take advantage of it. Yet Finland fortified the islands and placed mines in the surrounding waters in 1941. These breaches notwithstanding, the validity of the 1940 agreement was again confirmed in the context of the agreement on the cessation of hostilities between Finland and the Soviet Union in 1944, and this was also repeated in the context of the peace treaty between Finland and the Allied Powers in 1947 (Ahlström, 1995: 29).

It may be concluded that the rather international regime underpinning the co-sovereignty of the islands by and large survived the Second World War and was in some senses even fortified by the Soviet Union being drawn into the constellation. Similarly, the initially bilateral agreement of 1940 was embedded into a far broader context through inclusion in the 1947 peace treaty. Consequently, the regime defining the status of Åland did not just rest on a compromise struck within Finland and in the sphere of Finnish affairs or merely figure as a deal between Finland and Sweden. Instead of merely remaining as a historical anomaly, it turned into an international arrangement that could be adapted to changing circumstances.

It generally appears as though the various parties backing Åland’s special status have been content with it and accepted the outcome as part of a broader constellation. Crucially, this also seems to apply to the Ålanders themselves, despite their initial sense of having failed in their efforts to become a local part of Sweden. A feeling of disappointment prevailed for some time and was manifest in a number of struggles with the Finnish authorities (e.g. Sundback, 1994: 70). For their part, the Finnish authorities were inclined to pursue somewhat uncompromising policies, as they were equally disappointed with those aspects of the settlement that they perceived to compromise Finnish sovereignty. The liminality of the islands was hence conducive to some friction and the prevalence of rather sour if not outright contentious relations between Åland and the Finnish metropole.

This openly contentious constellation was short-lived, however, and was gradually replaced on the side of the Ålanders by active engagement and exploitation of the liminality and the instrumentalization of their post-imperial position. Hence, concepts testifying to the unique nature of the islands such as *‘särart’* (particular quality) and *‘självstyrelsevilja’* (ability and willingness to self-govern) have increasingly entered the local

vocabulary. There has also been increasing talk of the islands as a 'nation', with them being viewed as a 'minority' and Åland being depicted as a 'region' in references to its nature and identity. As to the conceptual and language-related strategies employed, it is also to be noted that the islands increasingly figure as the 'Islands of Peace' (see Sundback, 1994). Such labelling, testifying to a quest for the moral high ground, does not depart from some lost unity and an emphasis on organic ties to Sweden or statist and sovereignty-related aspirations more generally, leaning instead on a positive form of liminality, i.e. a departure grounding their special and non-conventional character. This also implies that with unity and the clear-cut self–other distinctions gone, there has been less reason to uphold an oppositional view and a kind of 'enemy image' previously cultivated regarding the Finnish establishment. Some of the grounds for critique and oppositional constellations vanished when Finland provided the islands with a new, more comprehensive Act of Autonomy in 1945.

The branding of the islands as standing for and exemplifying a peaceful settlement of conflicts has paid dividends, both internally on the islands themselves as well as externally on the international scene. The settlement has allotted the islands a special kind of image as well as furnishing them with some normative capital to be played out in various contexts (Wigell, 2013). Images pertaining to peacefulness have been further bolstered by a rather active peace movement on the islands as well as the establishment of a peace institute. The label has contributed to a considerable number of researchers, delegations of political decision-makers and civil society movements visiting the islands in order to become familiar with the 'Islands of Peace' (Granlund, 2010; Spiliopoulou Åkermark, 2011).

Importantly, the Finnish Foreign Ministry has also participated in the dissemination of information regarding the case. Above all, it has done so by organizing a seminar on Åland as an example of conflict resolution and peaceful governance in New York in 2001 (Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2001). In this context, not only did the islands stand out as a positive aspect of liminality, they also added favourably to Finland's foreign policy profile. They allowed Finland to present itself as a flexible and tolerant polity supporting rather than rejecting and resisting pluralism and multicultural developments (see Spiliopoulou Åkermark, 2010: 231). Accordingly, the theme of peacefulness brought the island and Finland together in an international and cooperative context, spreading the message that being partly other and resting on co-sovereignty is not, in the case of Åland, necessarily conducive to conflicts. Instead, it amounts to rather peaceful developments, also allowing the islands to be presented as an asset in the context of Finnish policies. With Finland increasingly branding itself as an active mediator in relation to various drawn-out wars and conflicts, Åland gains a positive reading in the sense of providing credence to Finnish aspirations on the international scene. This favourable view implies in turn that Finland is prepared to accept and align itself with the self-image that the islanders are advocating in promoting themselves, and thereby also to abide to the Ålandish version of normative principles grounding the position of the island.

More generally, it appears as though Åland has been able to capitalize on its exceptional character, for example in the sense that it has gained a rather distinct international reputation, particularly well known among scholars of international law. 'Every international lawyer has heard about the Islands', as Sarah Stephen (2010: 7) comments.

Nevertheless, it would be an overstatement to argue that the various issues pertaining to belonging and identity have been settled. Rather, the identity-related question of ‘Who are we?’ prevails in a number of ways. As Sia Spiliopoulou Åkermark (2009: 13) asks: are there any advantages in the somewhat ambiguous position of the islands, in being between ‘Swedishness, Finnishness, Westernness, and Easternness, between mainland and archipelago, farmers and merchants?’ She describes the ambiguous position of the islands as entailing both power and vulnerability, although she concludes that there are indeed some advantages worth mention. Local newspaper editor Nina Fellman (2009: 27) poses the related question of whether Åland offers the option of ‘not belonging’, answering herself in the positive in the sense that, for her, Åland stands out as the ‘land in-between’. Importantly, it may be defined without outlining and pinpointing any specific centre (or utilizing any standard concept defining political space) which would then allow the islands to find out where they are and articulate their essence. Åland may increasingly define itself as ‘an entity in its own right, a people who are neither Finns, Swedish Finns nor Swedes’, she asserts. Hence, it appears as though the in-between nature and non-belonging of the islands also provides for acceptable – if not favourable – identity-related anchorage.

This is also evidenced by the fact that a growing number of Ålanders seem to have generally become convinced that their rather special nature, one premised on demilitarization, neutralization and autonomy as well as an internationally anchored posture, is not merely a second-best solution imposed upon them against their will by unfortunate circumstances. It is not a rest category or the only one at hand once the ideal one, premised on the more categorical and conventional concepts defining their essence and grounding their identity, proved inapplicable. Actually, the rather ambiguous posture they have gained is now depicted in rather positive terms instead of trying to shed off their ‘in-betweenness’. This is evidenced by how the inhabitants define themselves overwhelmingly as ‘Ålanders’, with other, more distinct identities such as ‘Nordics’, ‘Finnish Swedes’ or ‘Europeans’ – forgetting ‘Swedes’ or ‘Finns’ – enjoying far less support (Häggblom et al., 1999: 15).

More recent contestations

Despite the growing acceptance of the islands’ liminal status, however, their standing remains somewhat contested. The underlying norms and departures are occasionally challenged, both by the islanders themselves as well as in the broader Finnish discourse.

The end of the Cold War in particular occasioned new games revolving around issues of identity and sovereignty, on the islands and mainland Finland alike. As to the mainland, there was the feeling in some circles that the somewhat ‘un-natural’ if not troubling solution with restrictions imposed upon the country’s territorial sovereignty in the military field could and should be remedied. They should be tackled along the lines of correcting any other issues seen as left-overs from a bygone period. Åland’s deviant nature and autonomy in view of what could be considered ‘normal’ should be straightened out for ordinary statist and security-related sovereignty to prevail. It was necessary to tackle that which stood out as an exception and a military ‘vacuum’ according to standard

power political readings, as it attracted unwarranted and perhaps even dangerous attention in terms of being viewed as a point of weakness. It was argued that the sorting out of Åland's ambiguity had to be dealt with, as the conceptual and political dislocation of the islands could now be remedied with the new, post-Cold War Europe allowing for such moves. It was further claimed that the standardization that was an integral part of European unification would in any case amount to a reparation of the complexities embedded in Åland's posture as a co-sovereign polity. So why stick to an outdated and sovereignty-infringing regime initiated in the 1920s as a response to conflicts typical of the 19th century?

A number of interventions – mainly presented by the Finnish and in some cases also Swedish military – therefore stressed that Finland, being a sovereign country, should have the opportunity to defend itself without any restrictions. This also applies, the argument went, territorially and conceptually to the islands, and consequently the restrictive aspects of demilitarization and the rules introduced by the League of Nations should be rectified. For the national defence preparations and the sovereignty of the country to be credible, the Finnish military should have the option of moving freely on Åland and the proximate territorial waters.

Nevertheless, these arguments pertaining to Åland as a deviation and liability – although presented rather forcefully and systematically – ultimately did not have the desired impact. Swedish voices, among others, were raised to defend the status quo and the established principles, hereby declaring that Sweden remains interested in the neutralization and de-militarization of the islands. A number of Ålandish voices also forcefully rejected the claims of the Finnish military. The Finnish Foreign Ministry eventually opted for a preservation of the status quo and overruled various claims advocating 'normalization' (Bring, 2006: 19).

As mentioned, it was interesting to note how Åland also became actively involved in the debate. It defined itself as being charged with the task of warning against infringements of the regime underlying the position of the islands and adopted a pro-active position as to the interpretation concerning the provisions regulating Åland's status (Joenniemi, 2003: 92–96). In fact, in 1992 Åland's Government passed its own interpretation of the 1921 Convention, thereby adding further credence to the notion of Åland as the 'Islands of Peace', i.e. an entity at odds with the conventional security-related and sovereignty-based logic.

The increased activity has not prevented further incidents, however. The demilitarization and neutralization regime was put to test during a military exercise, Nordic Peace 2003, with Finnish ferries transporting a number of Swedish officers and soldiers accompanied by jeeps, military trucks and weapons to Finland via Åland. Norwegian military helicopters flew over the islands en route to Finland with the permission of Finnish authorities. With the issue being raised in the media by the Åland Islands Peace Institute, the Swedes admitted that they had made a mistake, whereas the Norwegians stated that they had not been duly informed about the demilitarized status of the region. Finland's Defence Ministry argued that the passage had been legal, and the Foreign Ministry concurred, although they pledged to investigate which practices had been followed in the matter (see Spiliopoulou Åkermark, 2010). The incident showed quite clearly that Åland and various Ålandic actors have turned into defenders of the international regime as well

as the norms defining the position of the islands. They used it actively in order to carve out a position for themselves in the various games impacting the unfolding of the political space in the Baltic Sea region and contests concerning identities. Interfering with the military and security policy-related discourses ordinarily premised on sovereignty and standard conceptualizations of political space seem to offer a platform for the islands to position themselves and bolster their subjectivity.

Negotiating autonomy beyond the metropole

Yet another indication of Åland having increasingly accepted and internalized its post-imperial posture consists of the various efforts of extending and adapting the regime to shifting external conditions. An extensive discussion evolved towards the end of the 1990s concerning the regime's various problems and shortcomings. The islands had arguably become too dependent on mainland Finland for the autonomy and co-sovereignty aspect of the original regime for it to retain its old meaning. Consequently, the regime had to be revised and strengthened in order for it not to be hollowed out and undermined. In short, Åland's autonomy should be extended and also made to apply to cultural, political and economic issues.

Instead of merely continuing a culturally premised and defensive 'language struggle', attention should generally be directed towards the broader issues underpinning Åland's autonomy, above all issues of an economic and fiscal nature (Lindström, 1999: 239). In particular, in order for their arguably narrow action-space to be expanded – the islands should be granted an enhanced standing in the sphere of taxation. Concretely, rather than merely receiving an annual block grant (0.45 per cent of the total revenues of the state of Finland) from the Finnish state, taxation rights should be extended to cover more than just the ordinary municipal taxation (Karlsson et al., 2009: 19).

Complaints have also been aired that European regionalization and regionalization around the Baltic Rim in particular have failed to strengthen Åland's position. It has not developed as some had hoped. Moreover, the shipping industry, crucial for the economy of the islands, has been in decline, although balanced out to some extent by an increase in the ferry traffic. The decline is due to fierce international competition and prominent ship owners re-registering their fleets in the Bahamas, Bermuda or Cyprus. Furthermore, parts of the ferry fleet have been moved to Sweden to cut costs and there is also a lack of interest among youngsters to work on ships (Horward, 2009).

Yet another complaint pertains to the feeling that the Finnish authorities have not been of much help with regard to various proposed remedies, despite the EU-related regulations allowing for the coining of various countermeasures in the field of taxation. It has been pointed out that other northern European autonomies, such as the Faroe Islands and Greenland, had 'long ago surpassed Åland in terms of an autonomous standing' (Jansson, 2001: 17; see also Karlsson et al., 2009: 19–20). They have been able to capitalize on a more flexible posture amounting to constant negotiations instead of being restrained by a rather rigid and inflexible posture detaining Åland.

The debate thus seems to indicate that the constitutive discourses underpinning Åland are changing. There is the feeling that the islands should be provided with increased action-space and granted the position of a party, particularly in the sphere of

fiscal policies. Yet it is to be noted that the problems referred to – or for that matter the solutions – do not always pertain to Finland as the metropole. They usually have an international background and also hinge in some cases on various EU-related rules and regulations. They generally seem to be related to the meaning of autonomy and co-sovereignty in an increasingly interdependent world. Notably, the Ålandish unease has for the most part not amounted to a questioning of the very triangular setting existing between the EU, Finland and the islands, instead finding an outlet in dissatisfaction as to the action-space available for Åland within the sphere of Finnish–Ålandish relations.

The claims raised tend to be difficult to settle, however, as Finland – along with a number of other small states – is faced with similar problems. Compromises must be made, and far-reaching sovereignty is generally in short supply due to European integration and increasing interdependence in the sphere of international relations. The Ålandish demands imply that Finland should accept handing over increased autonomy to the islands despite its own sovereignty being under considerable pressure. This problem is exacerbated by the populist fluctuations discernible in the sphere of Finnish domestic politics, with the populists generally resisting any compromises on the country's sovereignty. Åland is depicted as an unwarranted deviation and a source of 'pollution' – and should therefore be pushed out of Finland for purity to prevail. According to various populist claims, Åland already enjoys far too many privileges and excessive financial support, including the lump sum annually returned to the islands.

Unsurprisingly, somewhat similar identity-related anxieties, conducive to demands for better protection of the particular nature of the islands, have been present in the Ålandish debate. Already towards the end of the 1990s, they amount to interventions suggesting that Åland turns into a microstate. Proposals to that effect have been advanced by scholars (Anckar, 1999) and brought up in political pamphlets (see Eriksson, 1994). A rather intense debate ensued for some time, and Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari basically criticized this either/or line of thinking. Clearly, the idea of trading the liminality of the islands for a fully sovereign posture enjoyed some support among the Ålanders. It may also be noted, however, that it has never gained extensive backing or amounted to concrete political measures for Åland to abandon its co-sovereign standing in order for the islands to be converted into a fully sovereign polity. Instead, the sovereignty-premised debate appears to have declined over time, even though it testifies as such to the existence of a considerable ontological uncertainty as to the essence and status of the islands.

In the beginning of the 1990s, the perceptions pertaining to unease and threat initially also entailed issues relating to European integration. It was feared that the pursuit of Finnish policies and interests in that context would leave little room for Ålandish interests premised on autonomy and that it would be difficult to have an impact on the EU as it did not recognize autonomous entities. After all, European integration is about standardization and doing away with deviations hampering the creation of larger political and economic constellations (see Scarpulla, 2001). Consequently, it was feared that the ambiguous, in-between nature of the islands could turn into a liability instead of remaining an asset to be cultivated further under new conditions.

Åland joining the EU

These fears have proven to be largely unfounded, as joining the EU has basically fortified the regime underpinning Åland's status. The islands were able to exert considerable influence on Finland's accession to the EU in 1995. Notably, according to the Autonomy Act, Åland's government and legislative assembly have the right to be heard in matters pertaining to its status. The islands have therewith been able to capitalize on the fact that any treaty in conflict with their autonomy must be approved by a two-thirds majority in the assembly for it to enter into force.

Åland has subsequently been able to decide on its own whether to join the EU and could have refused to do so. In reality, there was considerable space for manoeuvre available for Åland to utilize and, in fact, the Ålanders voted not once but twice on membership. They did so by first participating in the national Finnish referendum (and accepting membership by a relatively slim margin) followed by a separate, local referendum, which was organized when it became apparent that both Finland and Sweden would both join the union. The second referendum resulted in a rather clear 'yes' to EU membership, a 'yes' that obviously contributed to the internationalization and multilateralization that have rather rapidly developed on the islands. This outcome obviously alters the nature of the various sovereignty games. New channels for engagement have been opened up, with Brussels becoming a crucial focal point in the policies pursued. Among other things, the multilateralization has altered the quality of the previously somewhat remote and strained relations between Helsinki and Mariehamn (Sundback, 1992: 14). The contacts with Helsinki have 'increased tremendously since we entered the EU' (Norlund, 2008: 56), but the relationship has also turned far more complex to handle. More generally, it seems as though Åland's subjectivity has grown within a constellation that is broader than previously and also increasingly triangular in nature.

The Ålandish 'yes' to the EU was clearly facilitated by representatives of the islands being included in the Finnish delegation. Solutions were found to most issues, although clashes also occurred, as in the case of the Finnish negotiating team failing to support duty-free shopping on the ferries sailing between Åland and Finland (Fagerlund, 1997: 200). The various disagreements notwithstanding, a key reason accounting for the favourable attitudes and acceptance of membership consisted of the very process of negotiations and the outcome itself bolstering Åland's subjectivity. This could be felt both in relation to the Finnish metropole as well as more broadly.

Above all, the Finnish Treaty of Accession included provisions that bestowed special status on Åland within the EU. A special protocol was incorporated into Finland's Treaty of Accession, which granted Åland the right to derogate, on a non-discriminatory basis, from the (EU) Treaties with regard to restrictions on the right to domicile, to own real property and the right to establish a business. Significantly, the protocol also defines Åland as a 'third territory' with respect to indirect taxation, allowing Åland to remain outside some aspects of the EU taxation regime (in which Finland is otherwise included). This adds to the position of the islands being partly in and partly out in drawing borders differentiating Åland from the rest of Finland as well as the EU at large in terms of taxation policies (Eriksson, 2008: 52). Overall, Finland's membership did not imply a standardization and homogenization of Finland, including the relationship between Åland and

the Finnish metropole, in the name of European integration. Becoming a member has not undermined the specificity and in-between nature of the islands. Rather to the contrary, their liminal standing and ambiguity have basically been enhanced by the incorporation of Åland's specificity into the accession documents. In other words, the liminality originating with the verdict delivered by the League of Nations in 1921 turned out to be a source of strength rather than a liability when it came time for Åland to join the EU.

At the same time, however, Åland's unique status has been challenged in a number of ways. The previous relationship between Finland and Åland has turned less bilateral in nature, with both parties having to accept a pooling of sovereignty as a consequence of membership. Rather than just sorting out their bilateral relations, they are obliged to coordinate and harmonize their policies, otherwise Finland could, for example, risk a fine from the EU if Åland failed to approve and implement EU decisions. Hence, the Act on Autonomy was amended in 2004 to contain various provisions with regard to EU affairs, the implementation of decisions made within the EU and positions in matters pertaining to Treaty violations. The islands gained further opportunities to participate in the work of the Finnish delegation to the EU, and there is greater emphasis on the cooperation between national and Ålandish authorities when preparing responses to positions taken by the commission on shortcomings with respect to the fulfilment of obligations that fall within Ålandic competence (Stephan, 2010: 30).

These various harmonization efforts notwithstanding, the relationship is still not fully friction-free, as Åland's reluctance to ratify the Lisbon Treaty in 2009 clearly demonstrates. It remains unclear whether a refusal would actually have stalled the overall ratification process, but this was never tested as a settlement eventually emerged (see Karlsson, 2009: 146). In order for Åland and Finland to be able to avoid such disputes in the future, however, a parliamentary committee was tasked to make recommendations as to improved coordination and to find proper procedures to be followed in case of disagreement (see Nauclér, 2012). The so-called Aalto Committee report (2013) was published in January 2013, laying the foundation for follow-up aimed at updating and amending the Ålandish administration and legislation in order to bring them better in line with the prevailing circumstances.

Frictions within the triangular relationship pertain, in some ways, with Ålanders having the feeling that they are not sufficiently rewarded for having accepted membership and that their voice is not sufficiently heard in the EU in matters of consequence to Åland (see Nauclér, 2012). They have been granted the right to speak in the EU Court in matters concerning the islands, but they would also like to have a seat in the EU Parliament. As to relations with the metropole, they have complained that they are increasingly discriminated against in the sphere of language. The national Finnish preparations within the respective ministries tend to take place in Finnish, whereas the Ålanders – with their aspirations to remain strictly unilingual – for the most part do not command Finnish. The discourse between Åland and the Finnish authorities arguably reproduces Åland's partial otherness, but most of the various self/other constellations are now generated in view of the EU-imposed policies. Issues such as indirect taxation, the right to sell snuff on the islands and the ferries travelling the Baltic Sea or the hunting of migrating sea-birds – a springtime tradition on the islands – have become constitutive in essence. They pertain to the economy of the islands but are also felt to be of importance in allowing the

islanders to express who they are and what they are not. Helsinki is obviously part of the triangular constellation, but figures increasingly as a mediator between Åland and the EU, rather than just being seen as an opponent and a key source of the problems to be settled by adding to the distance between the metropole and the islands.

In general, the pluralization resulting from increased participation in European politics has not undermined Åland's subjectivity. Instead, new action-space has opened up, which the islands have quite competently – taking into account their lack of traditions and relatively limited resources – been able to utilize. The new and increasingly complex setting has not been easy to exploit, however. The turmoil has raised questions pertaining to identity-related stability, and resources have been extensively devoted in order to be able to carve out a more prominent profile and durable identity within the new constellation. As Karlsson (2009) and others note, the search for ontological stability has occasionally taken place at the expense of more instrumental and material gains, and has hence turned into a rather crucial issue impacting considerably the playing out of the altered sovereignty games.

Conclusion

The in-between position of the Åland Islands has actually turned out to be rather robust. It has now existed for more than 150 years in terms of demilitarization and some 90 years in terms of autonomy, demilitarization and neutralization. Clearly, the regime initially brought into being by the League of Nations in 1921, with the league deviating from the ordinary sovereignty-based approaches in organizing political space, has not merely existed as a temporary solution aimed at settling a particular dispute originating as part and parcel of a post-imperial setting. It has not just stood out as an anomaly created under specific circumstances and figured as an undesirable deviation from the rule of state sovereignty, sooner or later to be rectified and sorted out over time for normality and clarity premised on clear-cut bordering and undivided sovereignty to prevail.

Moreover, the regime premised on shared sovereignty in the Finnish context – and later also pooled sovereignty with respect to the EU – has proven quite flexible. It has been able to adapt to shifting conditions, internal and international alike. Instead of aiming at some fixity and viewing itself as a not-yet-fully-sovereign polity that is well on its way towards sovereignty, Åland has remained aloof from fixity and instead retained its in-between posture. The islands have actually become accustomed to being 'partly in, partly out', both regarding Finland and Sweden but also more generally in relation to the standard categories and concepts applied in organizing political space. They would therefore appear to remain difficult to pin down with the help of any of the usual categories and continue to defy any strictly sovereignty-based departures. Åland would therefore appear to have become permanently liminal in nature.

The specificity of the Åland Islands has endured, even if the underlying constitutive discourses have shifted significantly. One of the crucial changes consists of the constitutive meaning of security having been in decline, whereas arguments pertaining to identity, culture and particularly economic performance have grown in significance. In the latter regard, it has thus been crucial that Åland has been able to assume a specific position and in some sense ambiguous meaning – also in the context of the islands

joining the EU. Moreover, the weight of security has not only declined as to its impact; the constitutive meaning of security-related arguments has also changed significantly. Security has not merely lost its constitutive meaning within the sphere of Finnish–Swedish relations; it has also declined in importance in Europe in general and, moreover, pertains increasingly to local conflicts and specific regional conditions outside Europe.

This has allowed the islands to retain their meaning as a model and form of conflict resolution, although applicable now above in the sphere of international relations at large rather than relevant to anything related to the islands themselves and their nearby environment. Åland hence figures as the ‘Islands of Peace’ in this broader sense as an inspiring idea and way of encouraging forms of conflict resolution reaching beyond state sovereignty on the scene of international politics more generally.

Yet another change pertains to how the regime has been comprehended by the Ålanders themselves. Initially, the in-between nature of the regime posed a rather profound challenge to their self-understanding. The Ålanders, who initially aspired to shed off their ambiguity as ‘partly Finnish, partly Swedish’ by becoming an integral part of the Swedish realm, had to bear the brunt of the burden once the conflict was settled through international mediation. Importantly, the solution premised on autonomy and imposed upon the islanders conflicted with their search for ontological stability. It implied that they were in fact denied the option of leaving behind their in-betweenness and acquiring identity-related safety by seeking shelter and purity under the umbrella of being just local in nature and thereby at ease with the established categories of political space.

Initially viewed as a defeat, this solution – being positioned by the League of Nations as neither local, nor fully sovereign – has over time turned into something of a victory. Fiercely resisted in the beginning, depicted as a betrayal and seen as a move undermining Åland’s ‘real’ being, the liminal solution gradually turned into the bedrock of Ålandish identity. Rather than endeavouring to undermine the regime, as was the case for a while, the Ålanders hence turned into defenders of their co-sovereign standing. Self-governance has actually figured into the essence of Åland and being Ålandish.

The aspiration has therefore not been one of shedding off the ambiguity inherent in the island’s position and to aspire for normalization in relation to the ordinary concepts of political space. Rather, it has been one of exploiting the benefits to be accrued on the basis of such a stance in the context of various sovereignty-related games. This has also been evident in the context of Åland joining the EU in 1995, where the unique position of the islands was re-confirmed and further internationalized through the special protocol in Finland’s Treaty of Accession. It is also to be noted that in their pursuit of rather defensive policies, the Ålanders do not aspire to remain with a status quo but rather endeavour to add to their subjectivity through the usage of new conceptualizations, such as ‘minority’ or ‘region’, or by pushing for various political, cultural and economic measures that would add to their standing as a polity beyond the ordinary. On occasion, they may also resort to offensive approaches, as in the case of challenging various officials concerning interpretations related to their demilitarized and neutralized posture or by initially refusing to ratify the Lisbon Treaty to ensure that their voice carries, impacting the Finnish–Ålandish dialogue as well as the debates unfolding in the context of the EU. Åland also perceives it important to perform, in various contexts, as a guardian of the validity of the

various legal documents defining their special standing. In other words, the Ålanders use their subjectivity to defend and develop their status, with their co-sovereignty setting limits to the strategies that can be pursued and solutions coined – not just in relation to sovereign Finland but also the late-sovereign EU.

Various forms of sovereignty-related struggles have been discernible in the sphere of the Finnish–Ålandish relations. The interpretations favoured by the parties as to the meaning of co-sovereignty have not always overlapped, and the Ålanders have not ascribed benevolence to the Finnish authorities. A distance prevails in the sense that they are Finnish citizens who rarely see Finland as their ‘motherland’. In short, they are much more inclined to identify themselves first and foremost as Ålanders rather than Finns. The relations between the islands and mainland Finland have occasionally been strained, although serious conflicts have never occurred, and mutually acceptable solutions have usually been reached. It also appears as though the Finnish authorities have become less inclined to interpret Ålandish anxieties as a sign of irredentism and danger in view of the country’s unity. The diversity of views has continued but has quite frequently been transformed into a cause for cooperation rather than allowed to remain as conducive to oppositional constellations and political tensions. Moreover, and with the decline of othering and improved Ålandish–Finnish relations, the internal political and cultural climate on the islands themselves has turned less protectionist and more tolerant – not just towards the Finnish metropole but also in view of internal plurality. The increasing anchorage of their autonomy, demilitarization and neutralization into various international arrangements has somewhat paradoxically implied that rather than stressing the importance of local uniformity and a strict hierarchy with respect to the dangers to be battled and threats to be averted, the islands have more recently displayed signs of becoming multicultural and far more pluralist than they used to be.

More generally, it seems as though liminality as a concept and a point of departure is quite applicable in accounting for the specificity, ambiguity and in-between nature of the islands. It offers, above all, insight into why and how a small, insular, somewhat remote and less-than-sovereign entity has succeeded in gaining a considerable degree of subjectivity – not only on the national but to some degree also in European affairs as well as the international political scene in general. Liminal entities are ordinarily viewed as problematic, as their existence outside and beyond the socially pre-given positions tends to undermine the categorical distinctions that social structures rely on, including those pertaining to sovereignty. By being neither here nor there and remaining on the edge, they blur the clarity generally aspired for, but their deviant position also allows for reflection on the consequences flowing from the employment of such an option. The case of Åland also demonstrates how the identity categories and normative hierarchies such as those premised on sovereignty are inherently unstable and continuously vulnerable to subversion. They may thus be played upon, and the politics positioning themselves by acting upon positions of liminality do not necessarily have to do this to their own disadvantage. As evidenced by the experiences accrued by the Åland islands, there can also be much to be gained.

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