

The Åland Islands has territorial, cultural and linguistic autonomy as outlined by the League of Nations. The decision was the result of a conflict in 1917 at the time when Finland was gaining its independency.

1809 -Sweden lost Finland and the Åland islands to Russia

1854 – 1856 International status

The islanders wanted to be reunited with Sweden their kin-state, instead of being part of Finland.

- Not only for linguistic reasons, but also from a security point of view, Finland a fragile state
- Not a referendum, but a petition, 96%, an overwhelming majority,
- The King of Sweden, WW1, Russian revolution, independence of Finland
- George Clemenceau , Versailles, meet the interest
- Britain to LoN
- Swedish speakers in Finland in the meantime convinced the majority that the country should be bilingual

The LoN decided that the islands should be under Finnish sovereignty but with guarantees that the islands would forever be able to preserve their Swedish language and culture.¹ This was considered as possible as Finland had earlier laid down in their Constitution that Finland was a bilingual country, both Swedish and Finnish were official languages. The solution was labelled a minority solution (to protect a nationality), with very strong elements of protection most likely because of the few inhabitants that were to be protected (22.000).

A conflict between Sweden and Finland, three days to accept the solution,

27 June 1922 The solution was that Åland would have autonomy as laid down in the Autonomy Act that the Ålanders had refused to accept, but with some additional paragraphs named the Guarantee Law. This was repeated in the two following Autonomy Acts (1953 and 1993).

Paragraph 1 reads as already quoted Finland resolved to assure and to guarantee to the population of the Åland Islands the preservation of their language, of their culture, and of their local Swedish traditions and undertook to shortly introduce in the Autonomy Act the following guarantees:

The Åland Parliament and the municipalities (16) “shall not in any case be obliged to support or to subsidize any other schools than those in which the language of instruction is Swedish. In the scholastic establishments of the State, instruction shall also be given in the Swedish language. The Finnish language may not be taught in the primary schools, supported or subsidized by the State or by the commune, without the consent of the interested commune”

Other restrictions were introduced with the same purpose to safeguard the language of this very small minority. There were restrictions for purchasing real estate, there were restrictions on who could vote, and maybe most important the LoN should watch over the application.

1 1. “Finland resolved to assure and to guarantee to the population of the Åland Islands the preservation of their language, of their culture, and of their local Swedish traditions....”

This means that the language of tuition in schools in the Åland Islands is Swedish, and only Swedish. Finnish is taught as one of several other foreign languages. It would be possible to establish private schools in Finnish, and there have been such initiatives, but never enough interested persons or resources. Families with children having Finnish as their mother tongue moving to the Åland Islands are very well aware of the fact that the only official language in the islands, and in the schools is Swedish.

Swedish is also the only language of communication between the authorities of the Åland Islands and the Finnish state. This includes the branches of the Finnish state authorities in the Islands when communicating with the central state authorities.

The only official language in the Åland Islands is Swedish

To return to history when Åland got a new Autonomy Act in 1953 had the LoN disappeared and this is probably why Åland had a form of compensation named the Right of Domicile. If you have lived five years in the islands and have a Finnish citizenship, you can acquire the RoD and thereby without any restrictions by land, carry out business, and participate in the local elections. In 1993 Åland had a third Autonomy Act, and now another condition was added to be eligible for the RoD, namely knowledge of the Swedish language.

Chapter 6

Language provisions

Section 36

Official language

The official language of Åland shall be Swedish. The language used in State administration, Åland administration and municipal administration shall be Swedish.

The official language of the Åland Delegation shall be Swedish. The opinions and decisions of the Supreme Court referred to in this Act shall be written in Swedish.

The provisions of this Act on the language used in State administration shall also apply, where appropriate, to the officials of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, unless otherwise provided by the Church Code.

Section 37

Right to use Finnish

In a matter concerning himself a citizen of Finland shall have the right to use Finnish before a court and with other State officials in Åland.

Section 38

Language of correspondence

Letters and other documents between Åland officials and the State officials in Åland shall be written in Swedish. The same provision shall apply also to correspondence between the said authorities and the Åland Delegation, on one hand, as well as the Council of State, the officials in the central government of Finland and the superior courts and other State officials to whose jurisdiction Åland or a part thereof belongs, on the other hand.

However, a treaty referred to in section 59 that is submitted for approval of the Åland Parliament may be sent to Åland in the original language, if the treaty by law is not to be published in Swedish. A document referred to in section 59 a that is notified to Åland may be sent to Åland in the original language, if it has not yet been translated into Swedish. (31 December 1994/1556)

The provisions of paragraph 1 on Åland officials shall also apply to municipal officials in Åland.

Section 39

Translations

On the request of a party, the courts and the County Government of Åland shall enclose a Finnish translation in their documents.

If a document submitted to a court or another State official is written in Finnish, the official shall see to its translation into Swedish, if necessary.

A private party in Åland shall have the right to receive an enclosed Swedish translation with his copy of the document in matters that are considered by a State official in the State, referred to in section 38, paragraph 1, and on which the document shall according to general language legislation be written in Finnish.

Section 40

Language of education

The language of education in schools maintained by public funds or subsidised from the said funds shall be Swedish, unless otherwise provided by an Act of Åland.

Section 41

Proficiency in Finnish

A graduate of an educational institution in Åland may, as further provided by Decree, be admitted to a State-maintained or State-subsidised Swedish or bilingual educational institution and be graduated therefrom, even if he does not have the proficiency in Finnish required for admittance and graduation.

Section 42

Linguistic proficiency of State officials

Provisions on the linguistic proficiency of a State official in Åland shall be issued by Decree with the consent of the Government of Åland. (30 January 2004/68)

The State shall organise training in Swedish for the persons in its service in Åland.

Section 43

Information and regulations issued in Swedish

The Council of State shall take measures to have the necessary product and service information distributed to the consumers in Åland in Swedish, where possible.

The Council of State shall also see to the availability in Swedish of the regulations to be followed in Åland.

A good solution? Yes, it must have been as it is one of the few conflicts that has been settled by an international organization in a sustainable way.

A model? – No, there are no models. Territorial autonomy is a form for collective rights and implies that everyone is included. It is not possible to opt out as in case of personal autonomy. The members of the Swedish speaking community in Finland have personal autonomy. A person can decide that he or she belongs to the Swedish speaking community or not in Finland.

Finland is bilingual as laid down in the Constitution of Finland, and ruled by the Language Act from 2003. This act does not apply to the Åland Islands. The Sámi people in the north of Finland have special rights to protect their language as laid down in the Constitution of Finland. The Sámi people is according to UN definition an indigenous people. The fact that Finland has also these different regimes in the same country is unique and in itself a model, but it is very difficult to copy one of the components.

I shall not here dwell on the pros and contras being a minority or an equal language community, though in fact a de facto minority. There have been discussions on whether it would be more productive for the Swedish speakers to have the status of a minority, and thereby be able to make reference to all international standards on minorities and minority languages, but the discussion did not result in any initiatives to change the status.

Is it acceptable to have such strong protection of the language as in the Åland islands?
- Yes I think so as the population in question is so small, and would never have survived without these protection mechanisms, and with the support of its kin-state Sweden. Sweden has through the years supported the Åland Islands in areas where the language is important, such as education, media, social and health care.

But are there no problems?

The Åland autonomy is very often depicted as a form for privilege, resulting in nationalistic groups attacking the solution using arguments such as there should be minority rights for the representatives of the Finnish majority living in the Islands. There are no such legal notions as minority rights for the majority population living in the Åland Islands. This does not mean that there not human rights that should be respected. People moving to the Åland Islands are aware of the fact that schools are only in Swedish, and it seldom causes problems. There are 92 nations represented, and more than 40 different languages in the Åland Islands. It is not an isolated society.

There is no doubt that the language climate in Finland is changing and more and more nationalistic feelings are stirred up. We will this spring receive a so called citizen's initiative in the Finnish Parliament concerning teaching the Swedish language as a compulsory subject in schools. 50.000 signatures are required for such an initiative to be brought to the Parliament. But the expression used in this initiative is not "compulsory Swedish", but "forced Swedish" having a very pejorative connotation and somehow the word "forced" is related to a form of violence. This has nothing to do with the Åland Islands, but it is difficult to operate in a serious manner and be treated with respect in such an atmosphere.