

Reflections on the core elements of the autonomy of the Åland Islands as a minority protection device

October 2007

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It would be easy today for anyone to dismiss the Åland Islands arrangement as an outdated model, for instance in comparison with the current concerns of Georgia. The Åland Islands were not only granted an extensive autonomy, but received further guarantees, notably:

- Swedish as the only language in education
- Restrictions in the ownership of land, so that land is reserved for the local population
- Restrictions in the right to vote in elections (at that time all elections, today restrictions concern only elections for the Ålandic parliament, but not municipal elections)

The demilitarized and neutralized status of the Åland islands was also reconfirmed in the early 20th century arrangements.

Such dismissal of the Åland islands arrangement may then be easy to put forward today, when some of these arrangements are not possible to introduce due to the evolution of a human rights system, or are not feasible due to the multiethnic and multilingual character of regions. In fact in a recent interview in the International Herald Tribune recently, politicians from Kosovo rejected the possible usefulness of the Åland islands example as an antiquated 19th century solution.

My argument today is that this is a mistaken understanding because it neglects three core elements of the Åland islands arrangement:

- 1) It involved long-term multilevel negotiations both internationally, but more importantly, nationally in Åland and in Helsinki. In fact an act of autonomy had been introduced before the actual decision by the League of Nations. So this was by no means a quick fix by an international organization.
- 2) It was understood and accepted from the start by the Ålandic representatives as well as by the Helsinki government that there are going to be new tensions and unclaritys or open questions about the division of competences between Helsinki and Mariehamn. For that reason a number of safety valves, that is potential renegotiation fora, were devised in the Finnish and the Ålandic legal and political systems. They include that role of the president, the competence of the Supreme Court of Finland, the Åland Delegation and the Autonomy Committee of the Åland parliament. So both sides were from the outset prepared for and equipped to proceed into a long term dialogue. Finally,
- 3) Perhaps the most crucial aspect of the Åland example was that all parties involved in the period 1917-1922 (i.e. Finland, the Ålanders, Sweden, the big powers of the time Russia, Great Britain and France) were willing and committed to finding a compromise and to stick to it and even to add an international guarantee to support it. In reality this international guarantee (the potential role of the League of Nations) did not play any substantive role, but functioned rather as a last resort scenario exercising certain pressure towards compromise on the main actors (Finland, the Ålanders and Sweden).

Turning now to the situation in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, none of which can be monolingual or mono-ethnic, I find that the greatest of challenges today is the increasing difficulty to engage in any kind of confidence building measures where all sides, also at a civil society and intellectual elites level, can actually meet and exchange views not only on the issue of the future of the regions as such but on broader societal concerns. Recent debates on the ratification of the Council of Europe Framework Convention on National Minorities in the Georgian parliament also indicate difficulties in accommodating minority protection and human rights in Georgian political life, something that should be dealt with parallel to debates on the future of S. Ossetia or Abkhazia.