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Debate on Regions with Special Status

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Your excellencies,

I represent the Åland Islands, a unique autonomy in the Baltic Sea, founded in 1922 by the League of Nations, the predecessor to the United Nations. We are 30.000 Alanders flourishing in our self-governed society with a Parliament, where I am the Speaker, and a government. Autonomy gives the people of Åland the right to adopt laws on their internal affairs and to decide on the budget for the region of Åland. In many ways, we are like a nation with Membership in the Nordic Council, Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference and UNESCO, to mention a few of our international platforms.

The decision in 1922 to make Åland a part of Finland was controversial and unpopular among the Ålanders. The solution has, however, been delivered and is today more of a story of success than anything else. The powers guaranteed by the League of Nations and approving nations give Åland control over the key areas of daily governance that affect its citizens' identity and way of life. At the same time, Finland retains control over broader national concerns like defence and foreign affairs. This balanced Autonomy ensures that regional aspirations are met without threatening Finland's unitary state structure.

As far as is known, the Ålandic people have spoken Swedish and had a culture that was similar to the Swedish. Åland also belonged to the Swedish Empire, occasionally with a fairly independent administration, until the war of 1808-1809 when Sweden was forced to hand over Finland and Åland to Russia. Åland thus became part of the Grand Duchy of Finland.

One of the primary motivations for the League of Nations in granting Autonomy to Åland was the strong will of the Ålandic population to protect their Swedish language and heritage. At the time of the autonomy decision in 1921, the Åland Islanders were concerned about the growing influence of the Finnish language and culture after Finland gained independence from Russia in 1917. To safeguard their identity, Ålanders sought either unification with Sweden or robust protections within Finland.

The autonomy arrangement provided a unique solution: while Åland would remain part of Finland, it was granted special protections to ensure that Swedish remained the sole official language of the region. The Autonomy Act 1922 enshrined these protections, allowing Ålanders to preserve their linguistic and cultural identity while benefiting from Finland's broader political and economic stability.

The Finnish Parliament can amend the Autonomy Act in a constitutional order, and all amendments require the consent of the Parliament of Åland. Changes in the separation of powers between Åland and Finland generally need an agreement between both parties. The President of Finland has to approve all the legislation from the Åland Parliament. The current Autonomy Act, the third in order, entered into force on 1 January 1993. As we speak, a revised version of the Autonomy Act is progressing in cooperation between Åland and Finland.

I am honoured for the opportunity to introduce you, distinguished Europeans, to a solution that has strengthened both Åland and Finland over time. A republic with an Autonomy within its borders is mightier than one without an Autonomy. What is good for Åland is good for Finland, and what is good for Finland is good for Åland. Autonomy is not only a means to accommodate regional aspirations but can also strengthen a state's overall territorial integrity and unity. Regions with special status can serve as a bridge between regional identity and national unity, as evidenced by the long-standing success of Åland's Autonomy within Finland.

To the extent that it has competence, Åland functions, in fact, as an independent state. Åland has legislative power over critical areas such as education, health care, infrastructure, the police and postal services; we are also controlling our internet domain, AX. Swedish is the only official language of Åland, which safeguards its distinct cultural and linguistic identity. While Åland participates in Finland's overall tax system, it retains a portion of taxes collected on the islands, giving it a degree of financial Autonomy and budget power.

The Åland islands are demilitarised and neutralized; a status established in 1856 and reaffirmed in 1921 and many times after that is a central aspect of its Autonomy, ensuring it remains free of

military installations and activities. The status was, again, underlined and strengthened when Finland and neighbouring Sweden joined NATO.

These powers give Åland control over the key areas of daily governance that affect its citizens' identity and way of life. At the same time, Finland retains control over broader national concerns like defence and foreign affairs. This balanced Autonomy ensures that regional aspirations are met without threatening Finland's unitary state structure.

So, how substantial can the Åland autonomy be without threatening Finland's unitary character?

Åland's Autonomy, with its distinct legislative and administrative powers, coexists with the framework of Finland's unitary state. The arrangement proves that significant Autonomy can be granted without jeopardizing the integrity of the state. Constitutional asymmetry is, therefore, a strength, not a threat.

We do have challenges in developing our Autonomy, primarily due to the EU entry 1995, which caused friction between the Autonomy Act, the Finnish Constitution, and the EU Law. In the ongoing revision of the Autonomy Act, these challenges will be scrutinized, and administrative measures will be addressed. Politically, the relation between Åland and Finland is viable and fit.

By allowing Åland to manage its affairs while participating in the broader national framework (such as taxation and EU membership), Finland has maintained national unity and demonstrated that special arrangements for regions can coexist with a unified state structure. The Åland Example is living proof that areas with unique cultural or historical backgrounds can have strong Autonomy without undermining the unity of the state. The key is carefully delineating competencies that satisfy regional aspirations while preserving the central state's core powers.

What have we learnt from 102 years of self-governance?

Over the past century, Åland's Autonomy has provided stability and fostered economic prosperity, benefiting both Åland and Finland. As a physical bridgehead between Sweden and Finland, the Åland Islands have provided a natural meeting point for our two friendly neighbours.

The autonomy arrangement was born out of an international dispute between Sweden and Finland over Åland's sovereignty after the fall of the Russian Empire in 1917. The resolution in 1921, through the League of Nations, set a precedent for peacefully addressing territorial disputes through Autonomy, not secession. Today, we describe ourselves and our Autonomy as the Islands of Peace, and we believe we are a successful example of conflict management.

Longevity and success come from allowing Autonomy to evolve and adapt. Åland's experience shows that Autonomy can be flexible, serving as a solution to historical disputes while growing to meet modern governance needs. Asymmetric Autonomy is an opportunity rather than a threat, allowing for more nuanced and region-specific governance models. The key is maintaining open dialogue between the central government and autonomous regions to ensure mutual benefit.

The success of regional Autonomy depends on clear legal frameworks, ongoing dialogue, and a balance of powers that respects both regional aspirations and national unity.

Protecting a region's language and cultural identity can be crucial to successful autonomy arrangements. Åland's experience demonstrates that strong cultural protections, particularly for minority languages, can coexist with a state's political and territorial integrity. By prioritizing cultural and linguistic concerns, Åland's Autonomy provided a peaceful and lasting solution to a potentially divisive issue.

In our opinion, Åland and Finland's symbiotic relationship offers an interesting example for regions with special status. It shows that regional Autonomy can strengthen rather than weaken a unitary state. Following this debate, I warmly welcome the suggestion to form a working group or to hold high-level conference to explore expert advice on regional Autonomy. I hope Åland's century-long success can provide valuable insights. And we are at your disposal to share more of our experiences, together with Finland.