

## FACT SHEET

### Autonomy of the Åland Islands

<b>Background</b>	
Geography	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Åland Islands or Åland is an autonomous, demilitarized, monolingually Swedish-speaking region of Finland with a population of about 28 000.</li> <li>• Åland is an archipelago consisting of more than 6 700 islands and lies at the entrance to the Gulf of Bothnia in the Baltic Sea. The largest island (known as Fasta Åland) constitutes about 70% of Åland's total land area and is home to 90% of the population.</li> <li>• Mariehamn is the largest municipality in Åland, accounting for over 40% of the total population. Mariehamn was founded in 1861 and is the centre of political and economic activity in Åland.</li> </ul>
<b>Autonomy of Åland</b>	
Historical background	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Åland, along with Finland, was originally ruled by the Kingdom of Sweden but became part of the Grand Duchy of Finland<sup>(1)</sup> in 1809 when Sweden was forced to relinquish Finland and Åland to the Russian Empire. In 1917, when Finland gained its independence, the representatives of Åland's municipalities sought reunion with Sweden. However, Finland rejected the demand of Ålanders and the Parliament of Finland attempted to solve the issue by passing the <i>Act on the Autonomy of Åland</i> ("the <i>Autonomy Act</i>") in 1920. Åland refused to accept it, and the question of Åland's status was referred to the League of Nations for settlement.<sup>(2)</sup></li> </ul>

Notes: (1) A Grand Duchy is a territory whose head of state is a monarch, either a grand duke or grand duchess. The Grand Duchy of Finland was the predecessor state of modern Finland. It existed in the period of 1809–1917 as an autonomous part of the Russian Empire ruled by the Russian Emperor or Tsar.

(2) The League of Nations, predecessor of the United Nations, was an intergovernmental organization founded as a result of the Paris Peace Conference that ended the First World War. Its principal mission was to maintain world peace.

<b>Autonomy of Åland (cont'd)</b>	
Historical background (cont'd)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The League of Nations granted Finland sovereignty over Åland in 1921. In return, Finland was placed under an obligation to guarantee Ålanders the right to preserve their Swedish language, culture, local customs and the system of self-government. The League of Nations also decided that a treaty governing Åland's demilitarization and neutralization should be drawn up to ensure military stability in the region.</li> <li>• The <i>1920 Autonomy Act</i> soon proved inadequate and was replaced by new legislation of same name in 1951 and 1993. The new <i>Autonomy Act</i> enlarges the powers of the Åland Parliament, delineates the right of domicile<sup>(3)</sup> and authorizes Swedish as the only official language in Åland.</li> </ul>
Åland's autonomy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Åland's autonomy is safeguarded by the <i>Autonomy Act</i> passed by the Parliament of Finland. The <i>Autonomy Act</i> empowers Åland to legislate on internal affairs and vote on its own budget.</li> <li>• Any amendment to the <i>Autonomy Act</i> must follow the same legislative procedure governing constitutional amendment and requires the consent of the Åland Parliament. The division of power between Åland and Finland can thus only be changed on a consensual basis.</li> </ul>
Legislative autonomy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ålanders are governed by their own parliament (Lagtinget) comprising 30 Members elected for a four-year term by proportional representation. The voting age is 18, but the right to vote and stand for election is also dependent on possession of right of domicile in Åland.</li> </ul>

Note: (3) The right of domicile is acquired at birth if it is possessed by either parent. Immigrants who have lived in Åland for five years are entitled to have the right of domicile. The right of domicile in Åland is a prerequisite to: (a) vote and stand for parliamentary elections; (b) own or be in possession of real property in Åland; and (c) conduct a business in Åland.

<b>Autonomy of Åland (cont'd)</b>	
Legislative autonomy (cont'd)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lagtinget is empowered to pass legislation on a number of areas, including (a) local government, (b) education, culture and the preservation of ancient monuments, (c) telecommunications and broadcasting, (d) health services, (e) environmental matters, (f) promotion of industry, (g) local transport, and (h) internal security.</li> <li>• Finnish state law only applies in the areas where the Åland Parliament does not have legislative powers, including (a) foreign affairs, (b) most areas of civil and criminal law, (c) court system, (d) customs, and (e) state taxation. To ensure that Åland's interests are taken into account in the above areas, Åland has one representative in the Parliament of Finland.</li> </ul>
Economic autonomy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In addition to enacting domestic laws, the Åland Parliament is also empowered to pass the government budget for the distribution of financial resources to government departments. Åland's income consists of its own revenues and a lump sum received from the Finnish government, which constitutes a form of repayment of part of the taxes and duties paid by Åland to the Finnish State.<sup>(4)</sup></li> </ul>
Legislative control	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The laws adopted by the Åland Parliament are referred to the Finnish President for approval, who has a right of veto only in two cases: (a) if the Parliament has exceeded its legislative authority, and (b) if the bill would affect Finland's internal or external security.</li> <li>• The Finnish President bases his decision on the opinion of a body known as the Åland Delegation and occasionally also on the opinion expressed by the Supreme Court. Half of the members of the Åland Delegation are appointed by the Finnish government and the other half by the Åland Parliament.</li> </ul>

Note: (4) Åland has limited budgetary powers as the Finnish State collects taxes, customs duty and charges in Åland like in the rest of Finland. In return, the outlays of Åland are compensated through an allocation in the Finnish State budget being placed at the disposal of Lagtinget. The sum amounts to 0.45% of the income of the Finnish State budget, which enables Åland to manage such affairs which otherwise would be administered by the Finnish State authorities. Lagtinget is free to decide how to apportion the lump sum.

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## References

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