

## The Future of Åland Islands' Identity

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## 1. A Deviant Case

The aim of this contribution is to zoom in on the identity of the Åland Islands. It is to argue that it is bound to change, not just because of altered external conditions, but above all due to a profound change in the way identities felt to be secure are constructed in the first place. In making my argument, I am drawing on the concept of ontological security, which refers to an actor's ability to 'go on' in everyday life without slipping into a state characterized by a high level of debilitating anxiety. It requires as a secure sense of being that the actor is able to establish and maintain a sense of order and stability in regard to its salient environment (e.g. Giddens 1991).

Of particular importance for ontological security is the development of a coherent biographical narrative of self-identity that locates the actor – such as Åland – in time and place and in relation to salient others. Such narratives provide a core conception of who the self claims to be, and are important as they establish expectations about the nature of the environment within which they exist and provide a sense of orientation for the self in respect of its behavior vis-à-vis others. In addition, ontological security as a secure sense of being requires a certain permanence over time as to relationships with significant others, whether premised in the sphere of international politics on friendship or on enmity. It may also be noted that actors will seek to routinize their conceptions of self-identity, with such routines becoming performative of their sense of ontological security.

It needs to be noted, however, that ontological security is not a state of being, but always a work in progress. It may remain relatively stable even over quite long periods of time, but is nonetheless always open and therefore also in danger of breaking down, particularly in the face of unexpected and challenging events and developments (Kinnvall 2004: 745; Steele 2008: 10–12). Change may also occur in the sense that the constitutive pre-eminence of difference may decline and be substituted by that of being alike.

My claim here is that Åland is at the verge of such a breakdown. Arguably, the constellation that has over quite a long period of time provided the difference crucial for Åland's ontological security is being undermined. This then implies that the Ålanders are faced with the task of re-constructing a secure sense of being not just under significantly altered conditions, but also through a qualitatively different process with similarity and being alike to be foregrounded and with difference becoming less prominent. It is, however, also claimed that the challenge consisting of altered conditions is quite manageable for a variety of reasons, and that it may well be conducive to a situation in which Åland turns out to be rather exemplary and at best even a model to be copied by other actors facing similar challenges in the construction of their ontological security.

## 2. An Entity In-between

Notably, while securitization and the production of enemy images have traditionally been central in the production of the difference required for the construction of an ontologically secure state of being (e.g. Rumelili 2015), Åland has for historical reasons been compelled to apply a rather different approach. This is mainly because the Islands are neither a state nor an ordinary regional entity within a state. Åland instead stands out as a historical compromise to a territorial dispute between Finland and Sweden with the question of Åland's belonging settled in 1921 by the League of Nations. It was then ruled that the island should remain part of Finland – despite most of the islanders seeing Sweden as their historical ‘mother’ country – although granted an autonomous standing accompanied by various economic cultural and linguistic rights. In addition, the Islands were to remain demilitarized and neutralized, and in this sense quite extraordinary in nature.

Overall, the League of Nations placed the Ålanders in an ontologically insecure in-between position as an entity out of the ordinary. The League did so by rejecting their demand to join Sweden, but they were at the same time provided with the status of a co-sovereign actor within Finland, as well as granted some rights, i.e. ingredients of difference crucially important for the Ålandic regaining of a self-understanding and identity felt to be ontologically secure. It is as such accepted that the Islands are part of Finland, albeit it is at the same time essential for the Islands that there also remains space for dissimilarity and difference. The self-narratives have pertained to expressions such as Ö-riket (realm of islands) and ‘archipelago’, thus articulating a special and non-statist form of being, and the routines applied in aspiring for ontological security have revolved around defending their exceptional posture, including efforts of keeping in some crucial regards a distance from mainland Finland.<sup>1</sup>

One important aspect of the specificity of Åland consists of its neutralization and demilitarization. In depicting themselves as something out of the ordinary, the Islands can actually draw upon a considerable historical legacy. Russia's defeat in the Crimean War implied, in one of its aspects, that Åland was elevated above anything merely local in being provided with features of internationalization. The term ‘neutralized’ used in the 1856 convention between France, England and Russia implied that Åland was exempt from various military activities. Their demilitarized and neutralized standing has on occasions been challenged, but it has nonetheless stood the test of time.<sup>2</sup> Their character as a rather special entity at the sidelines of European power politics has been further strengthened by

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1 For more a detailed description of Åland's position vis-à-vis mainland Finland, see for example Teija Tiilikainen (2002).

2 For a comprehensive presentation, see Spiliopoulou Åkermark, Sia, Heinikoski, Saila and Kleemola-Juntunen, Pirjo (2018), *Demilitarisation and International Law in Context*. The Åland Islands. New York: Routledge.

the fact that the islanders have been exempt from compulsory military service, which is still applicable in the rest of Finland.

### 3. The Islands of Peace

The neutralization and demilitarization of the Islands thus implies that the ordinary relationship between ontological security and physical security has been reversed. It works in an unconventional way, as being included into the sphere of military defense would deprive the islanders of their ontological security, whereas staying outside – or going against military preparations as an ‘Island of Peace’ – provides them with a secure state of being in identity-related terms. Or stated somewhat differently: the difference required for the construction of an identity felt to be ontologically secure is based on staying aloof from any military activities, with a key aspect of Åland’s very being thus consisting of its nature as a neutralized and de-militarized zone located in the middle of the Baltic Sea.

Finland has as such approved the neutralized and demilitarized nature of the Islands and has at times even advocated it as a positive model to be copied in the context of various conflicts and territorial disputes. However, on occasions some quite deviant views have been present in the Finnish debate. In fact, standard power political thinking has been conducive to the argument that Åland actually stands out as a military vacuum and that it might therefore attract offensive military measures in a situation of crisis. Arguably, the neutralization and demilitarization detracts from Finland’s territorial security and that this ‘problem’ should be settled by doing away with Åland’s neutralization and demilitarization. In other words, normalcy should prevail in the sense of similarity inside and difference outside. Thus, from the perspective of ontological security, the debate is not just about military security but pertains more generally to Finland’s ontological security with the Ålandic difference seen as conflicting with the country’s essence as a fully sovereign state, and therefore also a fully secure entity in ontological terms.

These kinds of critical and deviant arguments have been present even on the ministerial level, with the Minister of Defense, Jussi Niinistö, claiming on a number of occasions that a demilitarized Åland stands out as a military vacuum, with this then constituting a potential problem for the defence of Finland. Moreover, it is in his view unfair that the Ålanders are exempted from serving as conscripts and he therefore recommends – for difference to be traded for similarity – that they are included among those for whom civil service is obligatory. The arguments advanced by Niinistö rest in general on the claim that the security situation in the Baltic Sea region has seriously deteriorated and that this then makes it mandatory to reconsider and revise some aspects of Åland’s special status.<sup>3</sup>

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3 See the interviews with Minister of Defense Jussi Niinistö in *Hufvudstadsbladet* 28.09.2017 and in *Helsingin Sanomat* 26.05.2018.

From the perspective of the islanders this implies that one crucial aspect of the difference that provides them with an ontologically secure state of being is under doubt. However, at the same time the discourse also signals that the difference is still there and remains relevant as to its constitutive impact. As the rights and exemptions important in view of the self-understanding of the Ålanders will most certainly remain – in being part and parcel of the rules set by initially by the League of Nations and hence not an internal Finnish question to be settled in the sphere of domestic policies – the outcome of the dispute actually strengthens the identity-related security of the Ålanders, rather than the other way around. One aspect of the difference employed in defining their being in a manner felt to be ontologically secure is still there and remains highly relevant. The general feeling that security in the Baltic Sea area has over recent years deteriorated (despite the region remaining void of any serious political conflicts) implies that there is in fact a discourse in place that continues to furnish the Ålanders with the ingredients required for an ontologically secure state of being.

#### **4. Competition, not Confrontation**

While the discourses pertaining to military security continue to furnish the islanders with some aspects of the difference needed in the construction of an identity felt to be ontologically durable, there are other – and increasingly significant – discourses that threaten to undermine their difference-based ontological security. They do so in foregrounding similarity and being alike as the prime ground for identities felt to be ontologically secure, whereas difference tends to be relegated to a secondary concern.

The foregrounding of similarity hinges on how states increasingly come into being not as warfare states as they used to do over a rather long period of time, but as competition states. A central role in such a context is attributed to international cooperation in terms of economic, social and cultural interaction. Crucially, the key constitutive questions are therefore not about staying aloof and drawing on difference, but being present and participating. They pertain to being basically alike and competing within a hierarchic constellation with other like-minded entities instead of trying to stay at the sidelines in order to secure one's difference as sovereign and independent beings (Cerny 2007; Pedersen 2011). The increase in interdependence and constitutive dominance of being alike then also implies that difference declines radically in terms of its constitutive value.

It therefore also follows that a profound change is underway as to the frame employed and the way the Ålanders aspire to gain ontological security. As such, the old world of power politics is still to some extent in place, although it increasingly lacks in credibility as there has during the last three decades been a profound shortage of traditional power political and inter-state wars. The changes then also imply that some of the core ingredients

underpinning Ålandic identity such as neutrality, demilitarization and being exempted from conscription are bound to suffer as to their constitutive impact in ontological terms. It may also be safely argued that the development towards the pre-eminence of competition states at the expense of warfare states is bound to problematize and endanger Åland's ontological security.

It may, however, also be noted that Åland has quite a number of strengths that should make it relatively easy for the Islands to adapt to the more general change in international relations with warfare states turning increasingly into competition states and similarity subsequently growing in priority at the expense of difference in the construction of identities felt to be ontologically secure. Åland is in many ways rather internationalized in the sense of a rich network of contacts and has, among other things, a long tradition of shipping as well as many other types of international activities. It has, in fact, due to quite successful interaction, turned into one of the most prosperous regions in Europe. It has been part of the EU since 1995 (as part of Finland, although to some extent on terms of its own) with this then implying that mainland Finland and Åland are increasingly similar in the sense that they are subject to the same EU-related rules and regulations. They are facing similar external challenges and it then also follows that it is their common interest to downgrade rather than upgrade or preserve extant differences in their mutual relations.

At large, Åland is quite internationalised in character and is in several respects – such as managing immigration – actually ahead of the rest of Finland. It may thus at least in some ways figure as a model in terms of successful adaptation to the growing prevalence of similarity in an integrating world. This then also entails a rather profound change in the construction of identities felt to be ontologically secure, as the parties are bound to draw on above all on being in key regards similar to each other with difference relegated to a secondary concern.

One important move allowing the Islands to be similar, and yet also in some respect different, from the rest of Finland consists of Åland being on its way of gaining a seat of its own in the European Parliament. This step testifies that there are ways and means for constructing an Ålandic identity, felt to be ontologically secure even if the previous pre-eminence of difference becomes undermined and identities have first and foremost to be based on being similar to significant others.

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