

Statement by the Åland Government's Minister for Education and Culture,
Ms Annika Hambrudd, to the 41st session of UNESCO's General
Conference

Paris, 9 November 2021

Mr. President, Madam Director-General,
Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

One hundred years ago, in 1921, Åland was granted autonomous status within Finland. The first parliament met one year later, and we count that as the birth of our nation. In celebrating our centenary, it is both an honour and a pleasure for me to address this assembly, when Åland is welcomed as an Associate Member of UNESCO. This is, truly, a landmark decision for us, and I speak for the Åland people and their government when I express my heartfelt gratitude to you.

Åland is an archipelago of more than 6000 islands located in the heart of the Baltic Sea region. The islands have always formed a bridge, promoting trade and cultural exchange. This has helped to form our community, being insular but far from isolated.

Åland's language and culture is Swedish, having been part of Sweden for over 600 years. Åland was then part of the Grand Duchy of Finland within the Russian Empire. Despite this significant political change, the Åland people held fast to their culture. During the period of political turbulence at the end of the First World War, the Ålanders sought reunification with Sweden. This created tension between Finland and Sweden. Finally, the question was taken to the League of Nations, where it was solved in 1921. This momentous decision and its consequences are known around the world as the Åland Example.

The League's decision created the conditions for stability in the region. It included guarantees to protect Åland's Swedish language, culture and local traditions. The League also decided that a new treaty regarding Åland's demilitarisation and neutralisation should be made. This reinforced the original decision to demilitarise Åland in the Paris Peace Treaty at the end of the Crimean War. This was the first time that Åland was the object of international agreement. Åland's special status can therefore be regarded as a peace project from the start.

Mr. President, Åland's UNESCO strategy is to continue this effort for peace, which is very much in line with UNESCO's motto – "Building peace in the minds of men and women". Åland already works actively with the implementation of various UNESCO conventions, which Åland has adopted.

Åland's long-standing maritime traditions are embodied in such things as the archive of the Shipping Company of Gustaf Eriksson, which has been nominated to the "Memory of the World" programme, as well as the Nordic nomination of the clinker boat-building tradition to UNESCO's list of intangible cultural heritage.

I would like to end by thanking Finland for their excellent cooperation in connection with Åland's application for Associate Membership. We shall continue to develop good relations through dialogue and respect, which constitute the signature of sustainable democracy.

Thank you.