



UNIVERSITY of STRATHCLYDE
CENTRE FOR
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AND GOVERNANCE



UNIVERSITY
of Prince Edward
ISLAND



COVID-19 Island Insights Series

No. 6, November 2020

Åland Islands

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The COVID-19 Island Insights Series is an initiative spearheaded by the Strathclyde Centre for Environmental Law & Governance (SCELG) and the Institute of Island Studies (IIS) at the University of Prince Edward Island in collaboration with Island Innovation. The initiative brings together critical assessments of how specific islands around the world have performed during the COVID-19 pandemic and the extent to which their recovery plans can promote resilience and sustainability in the long term.

For more information on SCELG see
<https://www.strath.ac.uk/scelg>

For more information about the IIS see
<http://islandstudies.com/>

For further information about Island Innovation see
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The Åland Islands
29,884 (31st of Dec 2019)
13, 324 km²

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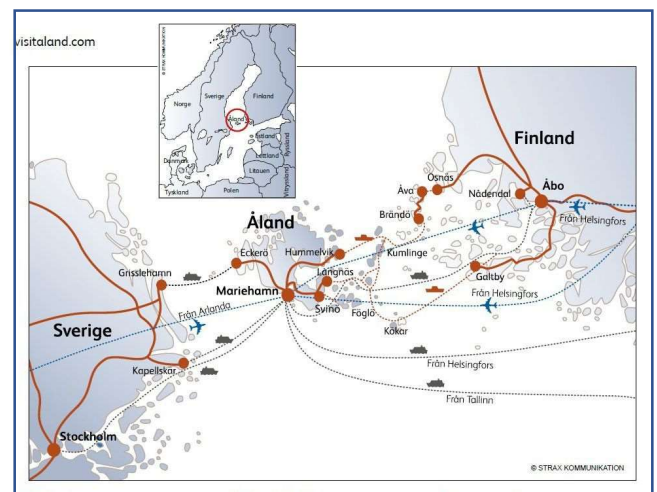
COVID-19 data and timeline

43 cases per 11th of Nov 2020 (0,14 %) vs. 18107 nationally (0,33 %)

Number of fatalities: 0 vs. 363 nationally

Schools closed on 18th of March 2020 and reopened on May 13th

Travel restrictions enacted on 19th of March 2020. From August onwards a colour-coded traffic light model used.



ÅLAND ISLANDS¹

¹ Source visitaland.com

COVID-19 on the Åland Islands

The Åland Islands are an autonomous and unilingually Swedish-speaking region in Finland. It consists of some 6,700 islands that are also demilitarised and neutralised. The division of powers between the central government in Helsinki and the regional government on Åland is regulated by the Autonomy Act of 1991. A major issue between Helsinki and Mariehamn, the capital of Åland, has been how the division of powers was affected by the COVID-19 crisis, as a result of the relationship between the Finnish Emergency Powers Act and the Autonomy Act of Åland. On the 16th of March, the Finnish Government declared a state of emergency based on the Emergency Powers Act in Finland, which also applied to Åland. The Emergency Powers Act gave, in the eyes of Ålandic decision-makers, the Helsinki Government too much power over Åland.² The state of emergency ended on the 13th of May 2020. After that, decisions are made on the basis of the Law on Contagious Diseases. Therefore, on Åland, the Åland Government and the Åland's health care system (ÅHS) are now responsible for the management of contagious diseases.³

Relations with foreign powers and hence, border restrictions, are decided by the Finnish Government. The Finnish Government decided to restrict traffic at Finland's external borders starting on 19th of March. In August, a colour-coded traffic light model was introduced to help communicate risk assessment.⁴ The border restrictions, most notably to Sweden, has been the most significant effect on the Åland society and economy.

On-line education in schools ended on the 14th of May along with the rest of Finland. During the rest of the spring term and again during the autumn, Åland is back to normal face-to-face education in schools.

² See <https://www.alandstidningen.ax/nyheter/sjalvstyrelsen-pa-undantag>. One concrete example was healthcare, which normally is autonomy competence. With the closure of the border to Sweden, Swedish health personnel could not serve the Åland hospital when the state of emergency was declared.

Recommendations concerning distance work remains in place since the beginning of the pandemic. Ålandic organisations have their own internal policies in the matter, thus allowing employees to work from home. Public places such as libraries remained closed until the beginning of June. Restaurants were allowed take-away services during the spring but reopened only on the 1st of June. The restrictions concerning public gatherings of more than 10 people were in place until the 1st of June, after which a ban on large events of more than 500 people was in place until the end of July.

After a calm summer with no registered cases for almost two months, Åland again entered the so-called "acceleration phase" in September, with stricter restrictions and recommendations, such as a limit on public gatherings to a maximum of 50 people.

Key socioeconomic pressures in the Åland Islands during COVID-19

Åland relies heavily on its shipping industry, both historically and to the present day. The shipping industry (cruise liners and cargo) accounts for 16.9 % of Åland's GDP and employs 1673 people (figures from 2017). Only the financial and real estate sectors count for a larger share of the GDP. Many companies in the private sector rely directly or indirectly on a vibrant shipping industry on Åland. Already in the first week of the state of emergency in March, the biggest cruise liners announced the stoppage of all their vessels, resulting in temporary layoff of most personnel on the vessels. For Åland people, seeing cruise ships laying still in the harbours was shocking, as Åland people are used to ferry connections to the mainland

³ Åland Autonomy Act, section 30.9.

⁴ See <https://thl.fi/en/web/infectious-diseases-and-vaccinations/what-s-new/coronavirus-covid-19-latest-updates/travel-and-the-coronavirus-pandemic/traffic-light-model-to-help-in-the-assessment-of-risks-associated-with-foreign-travel>, read 12.11.2020.

and Sweden several times a day.⁵ Suddenly the close connection to Sweden was cut off, resulting in an almost surreal new situation. Except for some absolutely vital travelling and transport of cargo, no vessels were trafficking the Åland-Sweden route before mid- June, resulting in a delayed tourism season. It is clear that the sectors that have been hit the hardest by the corona crisis were the transportation and tourism sector.⁶

The effect of the sickness itself has, however, been insignificant. As the community slowly learns to live with the pandemic, the hardest regulations have been lifted. The loss of Swedish tourists was partly covered by an intensive marketing campaign by Visit Åland towards mainland Finland. Indeed, an observation made by many was that during the emergency rule and also continuing into the summer and autumn, Finns and Ålanders themselves took to nature. Nature reserves and hiking trails on Åland were frequented in numbers not seen before the crisis. Many Ålanders also discovered the phenomenon of “hemester”, i.e. the “staycation”.

Unemployment rates rose during the crisis on Åland. The cruise liner Birka Cruises, for instance, announced in July that it would halt its cruises for good, which affected many Ålandic employees. In October, the relative unemployment rate was 9,3 % in comparison to 3.4 % the year before.⁷ During the heavy restrictions in spring, the number of unemployed and temporarily laid-off people were high. This number has slowly decreased since May, but the long-term unemployment rate is increasing.

The Åland Government has through, among other things, additional budgets contributed

with economic support to the private sector and the 16 Ålandic municipalities in order to mitigate the negative effects of the crisis. The shipping sector has received substantial support both from the Åland Government and from the National Emergency Supply Agency. Somewhat interestingly, the Åland finance sector has shown very strong results during the first half of 2020.⁸

Resilience and sustainability on Åland Island before, during and after COVID-19

In 2016, the Åland Islands embarked on a journey to implement the SDGs through a local action agenda⁹ and a vision: “Everyone can flourish in a viable society on the Islands of Peace”. This work has since translated into a network of agents for change across all sectors of Ålandic society, yearly status reports, and the first European Commission Sustainability Award in 2019. Vital to the crisis recovery work was the Åland Council of Development and Sustainability’s June decision, headed by the Åland Premier, to stick to the Agenda and its goals despite the COVID-19 crisis. The logic behind such a decision was that the Agenda was written to address the global sustainability crisis and that fact was not changed by the virus, in itself an expression of the sustainability crisis. Instead, the Åland Government and the Åland sustainability network *Bärkraft.ax* decided to mobilise for change. This was realised through a process where different actors from the public, private and civil sector, in addition to parliamentary representatives,

⁵ This is made possible by the Åland protocol, annexed to Finland’s Treaty of Accession to the EU, allowing Åland to stay outside the EU toll union while inside of the tax union. Ferries landing on Åland are therefore able to sell tax-free, mostly alcoholic beverages.

⁶ ÅSUB, Ekonomisk översikt hösten 2020, https://www.asub.ax/sites/www.asub.ax/files/reports/ekonomisk_oversikt_hosten_2020_-_uppdaterad.pdf, read 12.11.2020.

⁷ ÅSUB, <https://www.asub.ax/sv/statistik/arbetsloshets-situationen-oktober-2020>, read 12.11.2020. This figure includes persons on temporary layoff (*permittering*), who are without work at the moment but technically still has an employer.

⁸ ÅSUB, supra note 6.

⁹ The Åland Development and Sustainability Agenda, see <https://www.barkraft.ax/sites/default/files/attachments/page/media/development-and-sustainability-agenda-for-aland-2017-03-01.pdf>, read 12.11.2020.



brainstormed ideas for lifting Åland out of crisis-mode. The ideas and thoughts together constitute the fourth status report that was presented at the annual Bärkraft meeting in October. Another initiative stemming from the Development and Sustainability Council is a deepening of Ålandic democracy to be carried out through a series of citizens' panels on the topic of crisis – “what has the Corona crisis taught us? What are we prepared to leave behind now, and what are we missing?” The citizens' panels were carried out during the month of September and the results presented during the Bärkraft meeting. The Åland Government has then explicitly said it will take the results of all these brainstorming avenues in account when deciding upon measures to navigate Åland to a “new normal”, the road to recovery. The word “Bärkraft” itself, which is the name of the Åland sustainability network and movement, in its essence means “resilience”.

Ålanders understand that tackling crises demands all of us to act together. Even before the current crisis, Åland had a system in place to begin meeting the global sustainability crisis. The Åland sustainability work has set the course on 2030, when the goals are to be realised, and on 2051, when Åland is supposed to be a fully sustainable society. Other crises will inevitably occur along the way, but through the sustainability work, now deeply rooted in

Ålandic governance, the seeds to both material and mental resilience have been planted.

Useful Sources

- Åland Islands Peace Institute: <http://peace.ax/en/>
- Åland Statistics and Research: <https://www.asub.ax/en>
- Development and Sustainability Agenda for Åland: <https://www.barkraft.ax/english>
- Research at the Åland University of Applied Sciences: <https://www.ha.ax/en/research-projects/>

Published COVID-19 Island Insights Papers

#1. Malta. November 2020

#2. Egadi Islands. November 2020

#3. Grenada. November 2020

#4. Trinidad and Tobago. November 2020

#5. Shetland Islands. November 2020

#6. Åland Islands. November 2020



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