

## HÅLLBART INITIATIV (SUSTAINABLE INITIATIVE) APPLICATION FOR EGP CANDIDATE MEMBERSHIP FFM REPORT AND EGP COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATION LETTER

### BACKGROUND AND HISTORICAL CONTEXTUALISATION

On 24<sup>th</sup> June 2021, Hållbart Initiativ (HI), the green party of the autonomous Finnish region of Åland, applied to become a Candidate Member of EGP. The EGP Committee accepted this request in the September Committee meeting and organised an in-person fact-finding mission to Åland on 22<sup>nd</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2022, after the initial trip planned for early February had to be postponed due to the Covid-19 situation. The EGP delegation consisted of **Evelyne Huytebroeck** (Co-chair), **Mar Garcia** (Secretary General) as well as **Oras Tynkkynen** (Committee member). Throughout the mission, EGP met several representatives of HI, the head of government of Åland, as well as some stakeholders of the Åland civil society. To further the understanding of the EGP delegation on the interconnections of HI with the Finnish Green Member Party of EGP, Vihreät de gröna, the mission was preceded by a visit of the EGP delegation to Helsinki on 21<sup>st</sup> March 2022.

Åland is an **autonomous, demilitarised, Swedish-speaking region of Finland** off the southwest coast of Finland, which consists of over 6,700 islands with its population of just over 30,000 living on only 60 islands. Over 40 % of the inhabitants live in the only town and capital, Mariehamn.

In 1917, when Finland gained its independence from the Kingdom of Sweden, the representatives of Åland's municipalities decided to seek reunion with Sweden. Finland rejected these demands and Parliament attempted to solve the problem by adopting an Autonomy Act for Åland in 1920, which was initially rejected by Åland. The League of Nations intervened and granted Finland sovereignty over Åland in 1921. But **Finland was placed under an obligation to guarantee to the population of the islands their Swedish culture, language, local customs, and the system of self-government.** Åland had become **demilitarised** following the peace negotiations in Paris in 1856 after the Crimean War. When the sovereignty issue was solved by the League of Nations in 1921, the demilitarisation of 1856 was confirmed. The convention also neutralised Åland. The demilitarisation was confirmed in the 1947 Paris Peace Treaty. In the context of the ongoing Ukraine war and conflict with Russia, although demilitarized, Åland has strategic importance regarding its geographic position as well as potential renewable energy supply.

The **Autonomy Act** of 1920 has been completely revised twice, in 1951 and 1993. The Autonomy Act can only be changed on a consensual basis by both the Finnish and Åland Parliament. A reform of the Act came to a halt recently after the discussion did not yield any compromise. In practice, **the autonomy status means that the Åland parliament can pass laws in areas relating to the internal affairs of the region and exercise its own budgetary power.** The income consists of Åland's own revenues, and a lump sum received from the Finnish Government, which constitutes a form of repayment of a part of the taxes paid by Åland to the Finnish state. **Finnish state law** applies in the areas in which the Åland Parliament does not have legislative powers: foreign affairs; most areas of civil and criminal

law; the court system; customs; state taxation. Åland has one representative in the **Finnish Parliament**.<sup>1</sup>

Åland's political parties are independent from Finnish parties. As such **the political parties are formally registered organisations** due to the fact that Åland has no own party legislation and Finnish organisational legislation applies to Åland's political parties. The current multi-party system is still quite recent and only fully developed since the end of the 1990s.

**Hållbart Initiativ** itself is a young and small party. A previous green party established in 1985 held two seats in the Åland parliament but ceased to exist in 1991. In the parliamentary elections in 2015, 5 candidates were running on a list called Alternative Initiative, without an official party being founded. None of the candidates were elected but there was a will to move forward with the political project to foster democratic sustainability. The party under the name Sustainable Initiative, in reference to the previous Alternative Initiative, was founded in June 2019, just four months before the Åland parliamentary elections in October. HI ran with 25 candidates on its list and managed to win 2 seats out of 30 (8.3% of the vote) and took part of the governmental negotiations which led to a participation in the Åland government in their very first election. The **government since 2019** consists of four parties with one supporting party (Future of Åland): centre/centre-right Åland Centre Party (ALDE), right-wing Moderate Coalition for Åland (ALDE), the right-wing Eurosceptic Non-aligned Coalition and the green HI, under Premier Veronica Thörnroos from the Centre Party.

At the same time in 2019, local elections were held, and HI obtained **three local councillors** and is now represented in three out of 16 municipalities in Åland.

Hållbart Initiativ has one ministerial portfolio: The party's co-leader **Alfons Röblom** is **Minister of Development, Climate, Environment, Energy and Higher Education**. (The portfolio also includes housing and planning.) As part of the portfolio, the minister is responsible for the development of on- and offshore wind turbines that could see a massive upscaling of renewable energy supply for Åland, and potentially neighbouring countries.

### LIST OF ORGANISED MEETINGS

Prior to the two-day fact-finding mission, the EGP delegation met with representatives of its Finnish Member Party Vihreät de gröna on 21<sup>st</sup> March 2022 in Helsinki to discuss HI's application to the EGP.

#### Vihreät de gröna

- Sarianna Mankki, International Secretary
- Veli Liikanen, Secretary General

#### Hållbart Initiativ

- Erica Scott, Co-leader and parliamentary group political adviser, chairperson of the Police Council

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<sup>1</sup> Currently an MP from HI's governmental party Centre Party (ALDE).

- Alfons Röblom, Co-leader and Minister for Development Aid with responsibility for environment, energy, planning, construction and housing issues and the University of Åland
- Annette Bergbo, Member of Parliament and vice chairperson of parliamentary group, Member of the Law and Culture Committee, Deputy in the self-government policy committee
- Annica Sviberg, Chairperson of the Board of Directors and finance
- Simon Holmström, Member of Parliament and Member of the Parliament Committee on Social Affairs & the Environment, Substitute in the Nordic Council

**Åländska Centern - Centre Party**

- Veronica Thörnroos, Party Leader and Premier of Åland
- Harry Jansson, Deputy Premier

**Ålandsbanken - Bank of Åland**

- Peter Wiklöf, CEO

**Åland Peace Institute**

- Sia Spiliopoulou-Åkermark, Director
- Petra Granholm, Research coordinator and head of the Åland mediation office
- Liz Lindvall, information officer

**Regnbågsfyren**

- Sofia Enros, Operations Manager

**CONCLUSIONS****Evaluation of Hållbart Initiativ**

**Note:** For details on the party structure, political programme and activities, please refer to HI's application file.

The meetings between EGP and HI leadership were the first official meetings as HI was not able to participate in EGP Councils or other in-person events since its application due to the pandemic.

The EGP Committee has found Hållbart Initiativ to be a young party that has despite its short history already established itself quite well in the specific environment of Åland's political landscape and is still growing. It can rely on stable public funding for the party besides the budget for the parliamentary group. Further, amongst Åland's political parties, it has the biggest presence on social media and following the climate strikes, which also took place in the region, environmental issues are a priority of the Åland electorate as well.

**Hållbart Initiativ has filled a political vacuum in Åland, emphasising sustainability as a transversal concept throughout its programme without positioning the party itself clearly on the right or left of the political spectrum.** With this strategy it seemed to cater to the appetite of the electorate as especially non-voters turned out at the ballot to cast their vote for Hållbart Initiativ. HI aims to make a difference in policy-making process with the objective of making the island sustainable and onboarding different groups of society. Especially the tourism industry is an important topic for HI as it is one of the drivers of the local economy but also has a massive impact on the sustainability of the islands.

Following its electoral success in 2019, HI was able to achieve big concessions from its coalition partners in the governmental agreement as many of their programme demands can be found in the agreement: climate law, strong legislative framework on water, nature protection, investing in science and university research, etc. But their impact remains of course limited as a small coalition partner and a lot of efforts have to be invested to push for reform and alternative solutions with its government partners that have been in politics for a long time.

HI's relations with **civil society** mostly stem from party founders and members coming from civil society movements themselves, but there are no structural relationships with the party. This is due to the specific setup of Åland: with only 30,000 inhabitants it is a **close-knit community where it is easy to get access to decision-makers and politicians** and it hence less crucial to set up formal connections of NGOs to political parties. Secondly, as HI was founded shortly before the elections in 2019 and directly went into government, their relationships to other stakeholders have been established through government participation and parliamentary representation.

HI's connection to the EU level is so far quite limited as Åland is not represented through Members of the European Parliament. However, within the Nordic Council, HI sends on MP as a substitute. HI's minister Alfons Röblom is representing Åland in the Nordic Council of Ministers in the Council for Sustainable Growth, Council for Environment and Climate, and Council for Education and Research.

#### **Relations with EGP Member Vihreät de gröna**

Vihreät de gröna and HI hold regular meetings since the beginning of last year, but their political cooperation remains limited due to Åland's specificities and as the population is Swedish speaking, there is a close relationship to Sweden, and also a higher interest in Swedish politics than in Finnish.

The board of Vihreät de gröna has communicated to EGP that it supports Hållbart Initiativ's application and has no objections about the party becoming a Candidate Member and subsequently a Full Member with two delegates and one vote at EGP Councils.

#### **Final conclusion and remarks**

EGP acknowledges HI's vision to centre green issues at the heart of Åland's policymaking and its ambitions for government participation as a new political actor, as well as its self-critical assessment of opportunities and challenges as small governmental partner. The party is keen to work on inclusivity and equality. HI is the only innovative political party in Åland when it comes to its content as well as structure. The party has carved out a space for itself in the unique political landscape and can benefit from mutual exchanges within the European Green Family to further consolidate and grow its political capital. Especially since the party applies a European in its daily political work, for instance when it comes to issues such as climate and they also foster international partnership, e.g., by participating in the UN's Stockholm 50+ event.

At the same time, EGP notes that although Finland is a bilingual country, where the rights of the Swedish-speaking minority are protected constitutionally, Åland constitutes a monolingual region, where the Finnish language plays no role. The cultural ties to Finland are surprisingly weak, even though an offer of Swedish-speaking Finnish media as well as educational institutions on the mainland exist.

HI has identified the following two points where they are investing to improve:

- Increased and more structural investment in its local councillors and presence on the municipal level;
- Relationship building with the Swedish and Finnish sister parties;

EGP also identifies that an investment in youth participation is needed as HI has no youth wing yet. Further, a closer and more structural exchange with civil society organisations should be fostered.

### EGP RECOMMENDATION

From the observations and talks, as well as analysis of the application file, the EGP Committee could gather that HI is a well-established party with financing, activity, a structure and programme that fulfil the EGP's criteria and are in line with its values.

As part of the Åland government, HI is recognised and respected by other political stakeholders and civil society. It is welcomed by the Finnish EGP Member Party as a valuable partner and to allow HI access to the European Green Family.

**Considering the positive visit and exchanges, the EGP Committee recommends to the delegates of its Member Parties and to the 35<sup>th</sup> EGP Spring Council to accept Hållbart Initiativ as a Candidate Member.**

### FFM TIMETABLE OFFICIAL MEETINGS AND BRIEFING STAKEHOLDERS

**Note:** *Briefings, timetable and more info on stakeholders are available upon request to the EGP staff*