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News | 19.09.2012

e-fa: News Round-Up

news bulletin from the European Free Alliance Group in the European Parliament

September 2012 Round-Up

The European Free Alliance (EFA) draws together political parties fighting for democracy and self-determination for the stateless nations and regions of Europe. European Free Alliance MEPs sit in a European parliamentary group with the Greens, making up the fourth largest group in the European parliament.

EFA MEPs are:

Jill Evans MEP - Plaid Cymru The Party of Wales (EFA Group President)
Ian Hudghton MEP - Scottish National Party (EFA Group Vice-President)
Frieda Brepoels MEP - Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie (EFA Group Vice-President)
François Alfonsi MEP - U Partitu di a Nazione Corsa - Europe Ecologie
Ana Miranda MEP - Bloque Nacionalista Galego
Alyn Smith MEP - Scottish National Party
Tatjana Ždanoka MEP - For Human Rights in a United Latvia



Highlights this month include:

- MEPs in West Bank Visit
- Strasbourg decision criticised
- Minority languages in education
- Catalonia's non-bailout
- More support for victims of crime
- Common Fisheries Policy Reform
- Clarity sought over CIA renditions
- Basque prisoners organisation
- EU action on energy efficiency

MEPs in West Bank Visit

EFA MEPs **François Alfonsi, Jill Evans** and **Ana Miranda** will visit the West Bank and East Jerusalem at the beginning of October.

The fact finding mission aims to get a first hand view of the challenges facing people in their daily lives as they deal with the effects of occupation including settlement building and frequent check points.

As well as viewing the effects of settlement building for themselves, they will visit a refugee camp and hold meetings with local politicians and NGOs.

Updates and a daily video blog will be available during their visit.
Click here to follow the visit

Strasbourg decision criticised

The SNP President **Ian Hudghton** criticised the European Court of Justice advice, which threatens to reverse MEPs attempts to curtail the European Parliament's monthly treks to Strasbourg.

Every month the European Parliament moves from Brussels to Strasbourg for just three days at huge expense to the taxpayer, and at significant environmental cost. Ian is a long standing campaigner against this and supported moves to cut back on the Strasbourg parliamentary sessions.

The Parliament has a European treaty obligation to meet in Strasbourg twelve times a year. But MEPs had tried to curtail this by holding two separate sessions in a single week. France and Luxembourg took the matter to court, and initial advice has been supportive of their position.

Reacting to the announcement, the Ian said: *"The European Parliament's monthly trek to Strasbourg and back is an enormous waste of time and money. With millions of people across Europe suffering severe financial hardship, this monthly madness cannot be justified any longer. The Strasbourg sessions cost the taxpayer upwards of two hundred million euros a year. It's estimated that cutting back on just one month's travel as we'd suggested, could save fifteen million euros and some 1600 tonnes of CO2 emissions."*

Minority languages in education

EFA MEPs **François Alfonsi** and **Ana Miranda** welcomed a report adopted by the European Parliament which emphasises the importance of multilingualism in education in Europe. The report on Education, Training and Europe 2020 sets out priority areas for co-operation in education and training across the European Union over the coming years.

Key recommendations include:

* a stronger emphasis on language skills and multilingualism
* better training opportunities for older people
* the need to invest in education particularly in times of economic turmoil
* a stronger focus on early years development.

The report and its recommendations were adopted by MEPs with a large majority.

Corsican MEP Francois Alfonsi, a member of the Parliament's Culture and Education committee said: *"I'm very pleased that the European Parliament has so emphatically recognised the importance of multilingualism in education. The report specifically acknowledges the benefits of being able to speak more than one language, and includes regional and minority languages in this definition.*

"This is very significant in placing many of the languages which we use every day in Europe on an equal footing with the so-called 'official languages'. It's an acknowledgement of the role that minority and regional languages have to play in education in the future."

Galician MEP Ana Miranda said: *"The European Parliament has recognised the importance of improving education and lifelong learning in helping deliver a long term economic recovery. We need to continue investing in education and training in this time of economic difficulty to equip people with the skills they need for today and tomorrow's job market.*

"This parliament has emphatically recognised the importance of language skills from an early age. This means all languages - with Galician, Catalan or Basque having an equal status with Spanish or French, for example, in education."

Catalonia's non-bailout

In an open letter, several EFA MEPs have spoken out against erroneous media reports about public debt in Catalonia. Catalonia has sought a five billion euro cash injection from the central government to deal with its debt burden. Far from being a bailout, this is actually Catalonia's own money being lent back to them with interest.

The MEPs make the point in their letter:

Sir/Madam,

Catalonia - victim of Spain's financial crisis

The debt crisis gripping the Eurozone is being felt most acutely in a number of member states, including at the moment, in Spain. With a collapsing property market and spiralling unemployment, the Spanish state's public debt is sky-rocketing.

Discussion has turned to Spain's autonomous communities, and to prosperous Catalunya in particular, which recently asked the Spanish government for a loan to help meet its debt obligations.

To describe this as a 'bailout' is to completely misrepresent the situation.

The Catalan government is in fact asking for its own money back in order to pay its debts.

The so-called 'bailout' is in fact Catalunya's own money being lent back to them, with interest, from the

Spanish state. Since 2009, even under its own internal financing regime, Spain is actually in debt to Catalunyua to the tune of 12 billion euros.

This is over and above the fiscal deficit which sees Catalunya contribute up to 10% of its GDP or around 16 billion euros annually to the Spanish state.

As massive demonstrations in the streets have shown, many in Catalunya reject a Spanish state where the economic incompetence of successive central governments has taken the country to the brink of ruin, and now want independence.

As one commentator put it Catalans "have been forced to request a rescue even though they subsidise the rest of the country".

It is both misleading and unfair to label Catalonia's loan request as a 'bailout'. They are paying the price (quite literally) of Spanish government incompetence, and this must be recognised.

Yours,

Jill Evans MEP (Plaid Cymru, Wales)
Frieda Brepoels MEP (N-VA, Flanders)
Francois Alfonsi MEP (PNC, Corsica)
Tatjana Zdanoka MEP (PCTVL, Latvia)

More support for victims of crime

EFA MEPs **Alyn Smith** (Scotland) and **Frieda Brepoels** (Flanders) welcomed a new EU Directive which will give victims of crime the same minimum rights across Europe. The new legislation was approved by a large majority in Strasbourg this month. Victims of crime abroad can face many difficulties, including sometimes the language barrier. Under the new law, all victims of crime will have a minimum entitlement to free translation and interpretation, as well as psychological support. It's estimated that up to 75 million people every year are victims of crime in Europe.

Alyn took part in the debate. Commenting later he said: *"As more and more of our citizens view Europe as not foreign but our backyard, taking up rights to live, work, study, retire or travel across the EU, then it is a sad fact that more will be victims of crime when in another country. Being a victim of crime is traumatic enough, but when, in addition to that, the victim has to work with a different police and legal system, a different language and medical system then the stress is compounded further. We must properly fund a network of victim support organisations to share best practice and advise governments on how best to reform their systems. There is no shortage of expertise in Scotland to help in this task and no lack of enthusiasm."*

Frieda Brepoels was also an enthusiastic supporter of the new legislation. Frieda commented: *"This legislation provides a basis for a comprehensive European legislative framework for all victims of crime to get maximum protection across the EU. This should help victims overcome their fears or uncertainty, and give them the confidence needed to go to the police where necessary. This also works in support of one of the fundamental rights of EU citizens, namely the freedom of movement. Where the EU promotes freedom of movement, it must also ensure equal rules and treatment for people within that jurisdiction."*

Watch Alyn explain the new legislation on his youtube channel:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=owoF3RTg8AI&feature=plcp

Common Fisheries Policy Reform

SNP MEP **Ian Hudghton** took part in a major debate at the European Parliament in Strasbourg on reforming the Common Fisheries Policy. A major review is currently underway, and many are highly critical of the CFP for having failed Europe's fishing industries. There have been calls for responsibility for fisheries to be repatriated to Europe's member states.

Speaking in the debate, Ian said: *"These reports encompass some of the key issues involved in the ongoing CFP reform debate. On discards, we all agree that this scandalous waste of food must be ended, but we must accept that the CFP and its detailed rules are a significant cause of discards. The cod recovery plan and its catch composition rules are directly causing substantial amounts of wastage through discards."*

Ian argued for decentralisation in Europe's fisheries management: *"On decentralisation, let us allow Europe's fishing nations to decide, working together in logical sea basins, how best to conserve their stocks, because it is their future and they who will have the most incentive to make it work."*

Concluding, Ian said: *"The CFP has failed Scotland's fishing communities and to date, in spite of its absolute control over every movement that our fishermen make, it has been unable to help us resolve the mackerel dispute. I hope that by supporting the Gallagher report the Commission will run out of excuses and that we will have some action and that we will have a resolution to that problem. Finally, on aquaculture, the market organisation is very important to aquaculture, as is EU support for development and research – but not control or management."*

Clarity sought over CIA renditions

EFA MEPs **Jill Evans** and **Frieda Brepoels** supported calls to further investigate any EU government collusion in the CIA's extraordinary rendition activities. This would include whether secret prisons were set up in Europe under the programme, and the existence of secret flights with illegal detainees.

EFA MEPs backed a resolution demanding EU member states open independent investigations.

Speaking after the vote in Strasbourg Jill said: *"This will send a strong signal that calls for independent investigations into these secret prisons won't go away until the full truth comes to light. We have seen research from various bodies including the UN and Council of Europe, as well investigative journalists and civil society pointing to the existence of secret prisons. We know that extraordinary rendition took place. What we don't know for sure is the extent of EU member state governments' involvement in these awful human rights abuses.*

"As MEPs we are deeply concerned that European countries may have assisted in the extra-judicial detention and transportation of detainees. This is particularly worrying if it turns out to be the case that these people were transported on to third countries where they faced torture. EU governments have obligations under international law, and EU law. There is a political, legal and also a moral responsibility to uncover the truth about any collusion in extraordinary rendition. We cannot expect the rest of the world to take us seriously on human rights unless we are willing to practice what we preach."

Frieda Brepoels added: *"Europe is built upon democratic values, the rule of law and human rights and respect for human dignity. European member states have unquestionably - passively or actively - played a part in the illegal transport and/or unlawful detention of prisoners. Eleven years on from 9/11 it's high time for those countries to take responsibility and for the EU to admit that EU countries were involved in the CIA programme. If Europe wants to retain moral authority on human rights then it must also see to it that the war on terror is carried out with a proper balance between the need for security and respect for the rule of law. Respect for human rights is vital in ensuring the effectiveness of counter terror policies and maintaining the trust of citizens in European democracy."*

Voting in Strasbourg, MEPs approved the resolution by a large majority.

Basque prisoners organisation

EFA MEPs **Ana Miranda** and **Tatjana Zdanoka** held meetings during the plenary session in Strasbourg with representatives of Herrira (the association for the rights of Basque prisoners).

They welcomed the recent release of Iosu Uribetxeberria. It was noted that there are another thirteen seriously ill prisoners and there have been calls for their immediate release. They also criticized the illegal practice of extension of the terms of prisoners who are approaching their release date. This practice has recently been condemned by the European Court of Human Rights.

EU action on energy efficiency

EFA MEPs including **Frieda Brepoels** (Flanders), **Alyn Smith** (Scotland) and **Jill Evans** (Wales) gave their strong backing to a package of EU level measures to boost energy efficiency. The new European directive on energy efficiency was adopted by a large majority in the European Parliament.

It's hoped the new rules will help the EU meet its 2020 targets for reducing energy consumption by 20% through promoting energy efficiency.

The directive introduces mandatory requirements for renovating public buildings to make them more energy efficient, and will bring in compulsory energy audits for large companies every four years. There will also be compulsory energy saving schemes for utilities.

Welcoming the new EU rules, Plaid MEP Jill Evans (Wales) said: *"Reducing energy use is a vital in tackling climate change. It is also an economic imperative as energy costs continue to rise and energy security continues to be of concern. In short, it makes sense to reduce energy consumption and in so doing reduce our dependency on imported energy. In the long run, helping big business and public utilities to reduce energy will have substantial economic benefits. Energy imports to the EU amounted to 488 billion euros in 2011 alone - this is not sustainable and binding energy saving rules are one way of tackling this."*

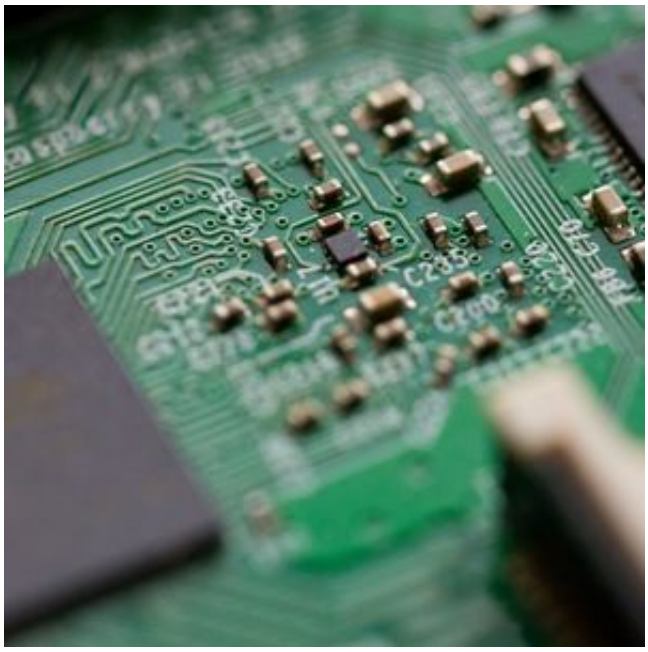
Flemish MEP Frieda Brepoels (N-VA) added: *"Energy efficiency is an absolute priority. The cheapest and greenest energy is the energy we don't have to produce. Energy efficiency doesn't just mean a saving on our energy bills. More energy efficiency makes other climate change targets more achievable. Energy use in buildings can be effectively dealt with, in part through improving insulation."*

SNP MEP Alyn Smith (Scotland) added: *"This vote is a hugely important one in ensuring that the EU is on track to meet its 2020 obligations of energy saving, creating jobs and providing a much needed boost to the economy. If I have any criticism of the package it would be that I would like to see it go further. The new Energy Efficiency Directive enshrines the EU's 20 per cent energy savings target in a legal framework to meet our targets for 2020. Member States will be responsible for setting out a roadmap for achieving energy savings, and energy companies will be tasked with delivering annual savings across all end-use sectors."*

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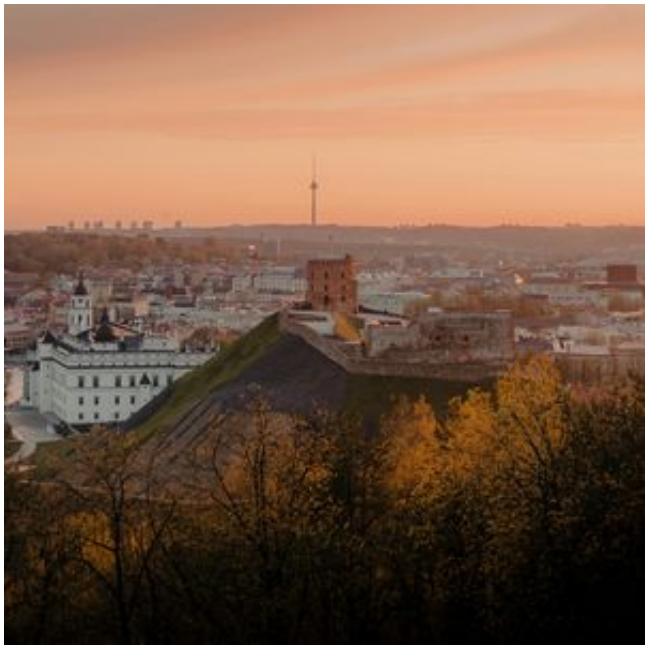
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Responsible MEPs



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Member



Ian Hudghton

Member



Heather Anderson

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