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News | 20.06.2012

e-fa: News Round-Up

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

June 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



Key issues this month include:

- EFA Group to launch website
- Multilingual consultations
- Appeal for Kurdish activist Leyla Zana
- Palestine and the Middle East
- Clearer EU rules for baby milk
- Offshore oil and gas regulation
- Spain's draft law on self-determination
- EFA MEP launches 'EU-tube'
- Schengen and border controls
- Unsafe Breast Implants
- Powers must be returned to fishing nations
- Frieda wins Golden Paw award
- UK failing on animal testing law

EFA Group to launch website

The EFA Group in the European Parliament is set to launch its own website in the coming weeks. The move is a response to increased interest in the work of Europe's nationalist and regionalist parties in the European Parliament.

Up until now, online information about the EFA Group has been available on a dedicated section of the Greens/EFA Group website. This will continue to be the case, but this content will soon also be available via a single, easy to use web portal or 'subsite'.

Multilingual consultations

Next year is Europe's Year of the Citizen, and in that respect the European Parliament has called on the EU institutions to ensure that public consultations are available in all official EU languages. EFA MEPs including **Frieda Brepoels, Ana Miranda** and **François Alfonsi** supported this, but also called for Europe's co-official languages to be used in public consultations.

Frieda made the point: *"Multilingualism and being able to communicate in one's own language is one important way of bringing Europe closer to its citizens. I welcome this call to ensure that public consultations are available in all official languages, but we need to go further. For example, does it make sense that 400,000 Maltese speakers can use their language in the EU institutions, but more than 7 million Catalans cannot? As Europe's Year of the Citizen approaches we can do much more to make multilingualism a reality."*

Appeal for Kurdish activist Leyla Zana

MEPs, including some from EFA, have called on the EU to intervene in the case of Kurdish activist Leyla Zana. Ms Zana, a human rights activist and member of the Turkish parliament, was sentenced to ten years imprisonment recently on a charge of spreading illegal propaganda, though she currently enjoys immunity as a sitting MP.

The charge related to speeches she made between 2007 and 2008 - some of them in European parliaments - and many have criticised the sentence as an attack on free speech. She has twice been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize and won the European Parliament's Sakharov prize for freedom of thought in 1995.

MEPs have written to the EU's Foreign Affairs chief Baroness Ashton calling on the EU to condemn the

verdict and ask Turkey to restore Ms Zana's civil and political rights. MEPs co-signing this letter include **Jill Evans, Ana Miranda, Frieda Brepoels, François Alfonsi** and others. Several EFA MEPs met Leyla Zana when she visited the European Parliament in Strasbourg recently, and EFA Group President Jill Evans visited Turkey and Kurdistan in April this year.

In their letter to the European Union's High Representative for Foreign Affairs, the MEPs say: *"We are profoundly concerned about the fact that Ms. Leyla Zana has been sentenced to ten years in prison. We are also dismayed by the fact that she has been deprived of her political rights such as the right to vote and the right to run for political office. She is an outspoken, courageous and nonviolent ambassador for the Kurdish people and for women in particular. She was indeed the first Kurdish woman to win a seat in the Turkish parliament in 1991. She has also been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize on several occasions and has been awarded the European Parliament's Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought in 1995. Ms Zana enjoys therefore wide international recognition.*

"We believe that these accusations are unfounded. They are a violation of the right to freedom of speech and, in general, of political freedom. Therefore, we would like to request that the European Commission and the Council of the European Union condemns the verdict and deploys all necessary means to ensure that the Government of Turkey re-establishes Ms. Leyla Zana's civil and political rights."

Palestine and the Middle East

The situation in the Middle East, and Palestine in particular, was high on the agenda of this month's parliamentary session in Strasbourg. EFA MEP **Frieda Brepoels** intervened in the debate with EU Foreign Affairs supremo Baroness Ashton. Frieda accused the EU of spending too much time on declarations and discussions, and of not doing enough to encourage real progress in the peace process.

Speaking in the debate in parliament, Frieda said: *"Let me put forward a concrete question about the quartet. How do you respond to the proposal made by the Arab League that they should be included in the process, making it then a quintet? I know that the United States are blocking that, but where does the EU stand? Perhaps that could lead to new momentum in the peace process. And better still, perhaps the UN Security Council should get directly involved in the peace process, seeing as how Tony Blair's efforts at mediation have so far not led to very much progress."*

Clearer EU rules for baby milk

The European Parliament this month approved a new law to improve food safety for babies and toddlers. The new law mainly simplifies existing legislation, but it does give the consumer improved protection as well providing greater legal certainty for the industry.

EFA MEPs including **Frieda Brepoels** supported the new law. Frieda commented: *"Clear provisions on ingredients, and clear labelling should do away with the differences in interpretation that have existed from country to country. We need to ensure a level playing field and a proper functioning of the internal market. Above all, the new law should help consumers make an informed choice by making products easier to compare."*

Offshore oil and gas regulation

SNP MEP **Alyn Smith** has questioned the need for the proposed Offshore Oil and Gas Safety Regulation, and been assured by European Commission representatives that they want to see "improvements, but no disruption to existing best practice" in the North Sea.

Alyn questioned the necessity of the proposed new EU-wide regulation which could be to the detriment of

existing offshore safety legislation. He reiterated the unanimous views of industry and union representatives that the package as drafted is in fact a retrograde step, though acknowledged that seen on an EU wide basis there could be merit in an EU approach for some states.

Speaking after a meeting of the European Parliament's Industry, Research and Energy committee, Alyn said: *"What was evident is that we all share the same concerns, and we are all committed to ensuring the highest health and safety and environmental standards possible. However, we must be wary that what we do actually helps, rather than hinders. The package as drafted is a step backwards.*

"But is this package actually necessary? Will the implementation of an EU-wide regulation improve safety on Europe's offshore oil and gas platforms? In Scotland, we take the issue very seriously. Piper Alpha remains a national trauma, and we do not need reminding that there is no room for complacency. The package as it stands is well intentioned, but is simply not fit for purpose. A recent joint industry and trade union paper argued the regulation would be a step backwards, and an analysis by Fitch Ratings concluded that the proposed regulation could cost the sector billions of pounds with no benefit. Passing legislation is easy, ensuring we have the right package and methods of implementation, is not. We must find a solution with the right amount of flexibility."

Spain's draft law on self-determination

Catalan nationalists Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya are introducing a new law in the Spanish parliament that will enshrine respect for people's right to self-determination.

The new law would provide a path to independence should more than fifty per cent of voters in Catalonia or another of Spain's autonomous communities decide in favour of becoming an independent state through a legitimate democratic process. Alfred Bosch is the Esquerra MP introducing the new law and he came to the European Parliament in Brussels to explain his initiative to EFA MEPs and others.

EFA MEP launches 'EU-tube'

SNP MEP **Alyn Smith** is setting up his own 'EU-tube' television channel. Alyn will produce, present and set up a series of online videos. Viewers will have the chance to contact him directly and ask any question they like about the EU. An introductory video has already been posted on You Tube as part of his new Alyn Explains series. They will be linked to Twitter and Facebook and will also be put up on his web site.

Alyn explained: *"A lot of people see Europe as something distant and complex, but it's hugely relevant to Scotland, and to all our lives, as a lot of things affecting us all happen there. The videos are intended to explain how the EU works and to give the people I represent the opportunity to ask anything they'd like to know and to get answers. Though we'll often be dealing with big issues and serious subjects, the videos are intended to be short, snappy and fun to watch. I hope people will enjoy them and learn from them.*

"They may hear stories about the amount of money the EU spends, but I'm shooting these myself on my own iPad and then uploading them myself, so giving out the information in this way costs nothing at all."

See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lULUeTqo8Ig

Schengen and border controls

Some EFA MEPs regretted moves by Europe's governments to provide for the temporary reintroduction of border controls in the passport-free Schengen area in exceptional circumstances. They were particularly annoyed at attempts to exclude the European Parliament from the decision making process.

The Schengen zone provides for passport free travel across internal borders in most of the European Union. It takes in most EU member states as well as Norway, Iceland, Lichtenstein and Switzerland, but not the UK and Ireland. It does not yet apply to Bulgaria, Romania and Cyprus.

EFA MEP Tatjana Ždanoka is a member of the European Parliament's Civil Liberties committee. She commented: *"Given the trans-national nature of the Schengen border-free system, it is logical and essential that decisions to temporarily reintroduce border controls be subject to EU-level approval. I regret that at committee level a majority of MEPs failed to support ensuring all decisions on the reintroduction of border controls should be taken at EU-level."*

Flemish MEP Frieda Brepoels also commented: *"I deeply regret the European Council decision. The Schengen agreement is supposed to make it easier for European citizens to travel around, and that kind of decision must be taken at EU level. There's no doubt that we've seen weaknesses exposed in the workings of Schengen over recent months and years, but those must be dealt with using existing EU decision making procedures. As guardian of the Treaties, the European Commission is best placed to deal with the haggling between member states about border controls. Until new legislation is brought forward, it's clear that member states within Schengen may only reintroduce border controls on a temporary basis and then only in extraordinary circumstances."*

Unsafe Breast Implants

Following on from the scandal surrounding the controversial PIP breast implants, the European Parliament has backed a series of recommendations that would make such a scandal far less likely to be repeated.

As well as a Europe wide database for surgical implants, MEPs want to ensure better control, traceability and co-ordination in this field.

Flemish MEP **Frieda Brepoels** is a member of the European Parliament's Public Health Committee. Speaking before the vote, she commented: *"The fraud surrounding the breast implants has exposed the shortcomings in the existing legislation. There is a useful lesson to be learnt from this case. The European Parliament is in effect putting forward a list of recommendations to be included in the upcoming EU law on medical devices which is due this year. That includes strengthening of market authorisation, mandatory unannounced inspections, more traceability and better co-ordination between member states."*

Powers must be returned to fishing nations

As talks intensify on preparing for reform of Europe's controversial Common Fisheries Policy, the issue was raised at a debate in the European Parliament in Strasbourg.

SNP President **Ian Hudghton** slammed the Common Fisheries Policy as a complete failure. He went on to call for powers over fisheries management to be returned to Europe's fishing nations as a matter of urgency. MEPs had been debating a report by a Scottish Tory MEP and this followed earlier discussion in Luxembourg by European Fisheries Ministers on reforming the CFP.

Commenting, Ian said: "*There is now absolutely no doubt that the CFP has been a complete failure. Centralised control from Brussels has been disastrous as far as properly and sustainably managing Europe's fish stocks is concerned. There is a renewed urgency to return powers over fisheries to the member states, and ministers have now recognised that. It's now high time for the European Parliament to face up to reality on this and back the repatriation of fisheries powers to the member states."*

Speaking in the debate Ian said: *"The fact is that the Lisbon Treaty has created a confused and unsatisfactory situation in relation to fisheries management decision-making. The CFP Reform process*

provides an opportunity to re-examine and radically change the structure of fisheries management by sweeping away the over-centralised methods which have failed us so badly. Instead of obsessively safeguarding the rights of EU institutions, we ought to be designing a decision-making framework which will succeed in its stated objectives.

"In my view that means maximum decentralisation so that Europe's fishing nations, working together in logical sea basins, can be empowered to conserve stocks for their own future benefit in the long term. But the Commission claims the Lisbon Treaty prevents them from proposing substantial decentralisation. The EP legal services take a different view. The result is confusion and endless wrangling about EU institutional rights rather than focussing on the job in hand. I hope that this Parliament will put the preservation of fish stocks and fisheries dependent communities first. That means returning real powers to fishing nations such as Scotland."

Frieda wins Golden Paw award

N-VA MEP **Frieda Brepoels** has received the prestigious Golden Paw award from Flemish animal rights activists for her work in defence of seals. Thanks to Frieda's commitment, a Europe-wide ban now exists on the trade in seal products. As a result, the lives of half a million seals have been saved over the last two years alone.

UK failing on animal testing law

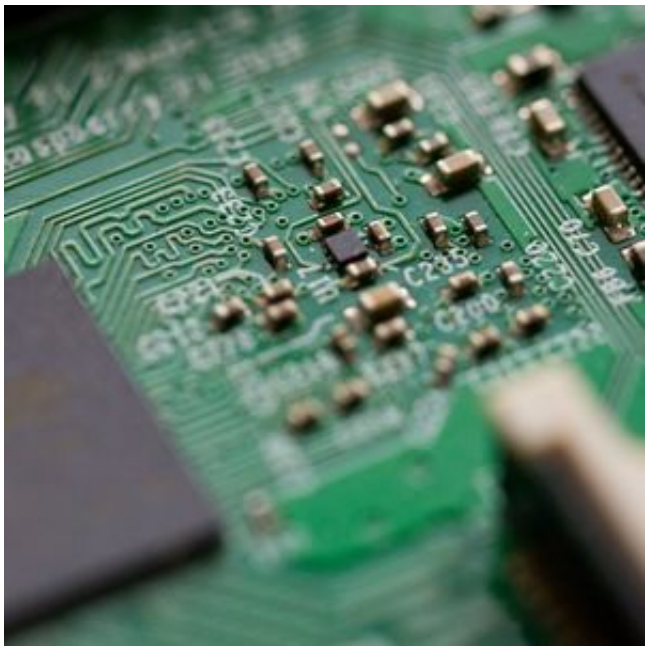
Welsh MEP **Jill Evans** has written to the UK Home Office to express her concerns about the UK's implementation of European rules on animal testing. Jill helped draft the European Directive on Animal Testing. She said that the UK has failed in two key areas - maintaining the UK opt-out from a European ban on using stray animals for experiments, and failing to set out a list of prohibited scientific techniques considered too cruel.

Governments across the EU are obliged to comply with the new directive - which sets out minimum standards for treating animals used in experiments - by the start of 2013. Jill said: *"I am concerned about two issues in particular. First, the authorisation of the use of stray pets in experiments. There is unanimous support from animal welfare groups for maintaining a ban, as is the current situation. I have urged the UK Home Office to maintain the current prohibition on the use of stray and feral animals in animal testing experiments.*

"I am also concerned that a list of prohibited procedures will not be included in the legislation - such a list would ensure that animals used for experiments are not subjected to particularly cruel treatments, like electric shocks. While there were some positive announcements, the situation as it stands will worsen Wales' animal welfare record."

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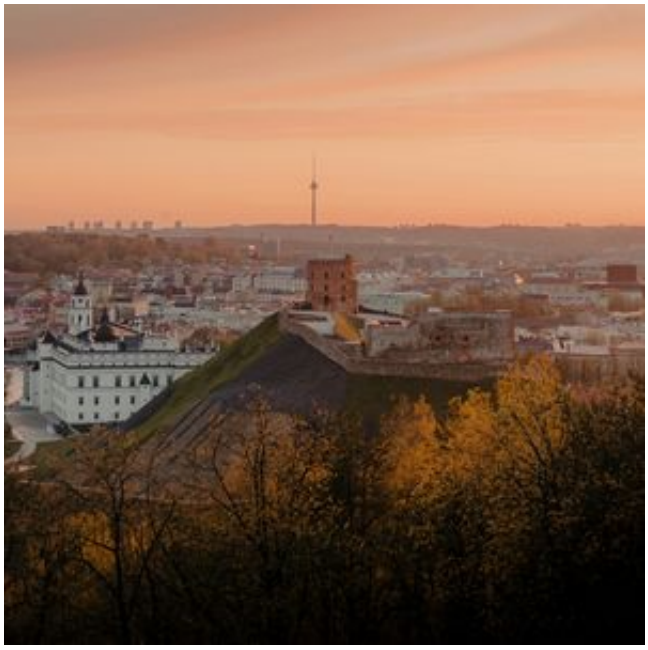
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Responsible MEPs



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Member



Ian Hudghton

Member



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