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# e-fa: News Round-up

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

### December 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:

- **Basque and Catalan elections**
- **Welsh Census results**
- **CFP Decentralisation**
- **Strong Backing for Fundamental Rights Agency**
- **ECJ Strasbourg Ruling**
- **Evans highlights EU membership benefits**
- **Eight hour animal transport limit**
- **French beer tax**
- **Better airports**
- **Basque peace process**
- **European patent**

**Basque and Catalan elections**

Recent Catalan elections saw nationalists supporting an independence referendum win a majority of seats. Left wing republican nationalists ERC more than doubled their representation, with former EFA MEP Oriol Junqueras leading the party to their best result in a generation. They are supporting a minority government of the moderate CiU party in return for a firm commitment to holding a referendum, during 2014. Recent polls have shown some 57% of Catalans support independence.

In the Basque Country, elections saw the moderate PNV (Basque National Party) emerge as the largest party but without an overall majority. The left-wing pro-independence Bildu coalition polled strongly and are expected to be an influential force in years to come. The PNV's Inigo Urkullu has been elected Prime Minister but will need the support of other pro-independence parties.

**Welsh census results**

Results of the 2011 census showed a small decline in the number of Welsh speakers. Around 19% of the population of Wales speak Welsh, down 2% since over the past decade. Campaigners have called for changes in planning laws, the education system and how the language is used in the public sector to halt the decline.

The same census also showed an increase in the sense of Welsh national identity with 66% of people in Wales choosing 'Welsh' as their national identity. Interestingly, almost a third of people said they had no religious belief, higher than anywhere in England.

**Backing for CFP decentralisation**

SNP President Ian Hudghton welcomed backing from the European Parliament's Fisheries Committee for substantial controls over fisheries to be returned to Europe's fishing nations.

The support came in a major vote on the Common Fisheries Policy reform package. MEPs backed proposals from the SNP to empower fishing nations in key areas of marine management. The vote came despite last minute lobbying from Spanish and French interests to delay CFP reform. A final vote is expected in the full Parliament in February or March. Negotiations will then take place between the Parliament, the Commission and the European Council.

Ian commented: *"I'm delighted that MEPs have backed real powers being returned to Europe's fishing nations. This builds upon the previous success of the Scottish government in arguing for real decentralisation of the CFP in the Council of Ministers. The parliament's final vote will take place in the new year and there is still work to do before then. The committee vote was long and complex and much of the detail will need to be further amended.*

*"Nevertheless, there is much to welcome. In addition to the calls for national powers, the committee completely rejected Commission proposals for fishing rights to become tradable commodities. Such a scheme would have seen fishing quotas bought and sold on international markets - and could have seen Scotland's historic rights swept up by the Spanish fleet. A number of MEPs sought to delay the vote in an attempt to derail CFP reform. While dangers still lie ahead, the committee decision was an important first step. We must ensure that the final reform package guarantees a future for our coastal communities".*

**Strong backing for Fundamental Rights Agency**

The European Parliament gave its strong backing to the work of the EU's Fundamental Rights Agency. MEPs voted by a large majority to support the work programme of the agency for the next five years - known as the 'multi-annual framework'. The move was welcomed by MEP Tatjana Ždanoka who was the 'rapporteur' responsible for steering the legislation through Parliament. The Parliament gave its consent to an ongoing programme of work which now needs to be agreed by the Council of Ministers.

But concerns remain that the work of the agency may be put in jeopardy by the UK government's refusal to agree the multi-annual framework in the Council of Ministers. The UK wants to wait for its own parliament to scrutinise the framework before giving a view. This may lead to specific work on thematic areas of work being delayed for many months. The Vienna-based EU Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) was established in 2007. Its role is to collect and analyse data on fundamental rights issues within the EU and to focus on particular thematic areas within the scope of EU law. It has published useful and influential reports on issues such as racism, xenophobia and homophobia.

The rapporteur said she was disappointed with attempts by some EU Member state governments to 'water-down' the work of the agency by excluding certain specific thematic areas from the agency's work. These include discrimination against national minorities and police and judicial co-operation in criminal matters.

Speaking in the European Parliament, Tatjana Ždanoka said: *"I deeply regret the lack of agreement in the Council as regards the inclusion of the proposed new thematic areas of police cooperation and judicial cooperation in criminal matters. Following the Lisbon Treaty, police cooperation and judicial cooperation in criminal matters have become part of EU law and are therefore covered by the scope of work of the FRA. I am also very concerned by reported attempts of several Member States in the Council to exclude discrimination based on membership of a national minority from the thematic areas. I find such attempts unacceptable.*

*"In other circumstances I would invite the European Parliament to decline to consent to this framework so that we might try to find a better solution. However, the agency needs new thematic areas of work to ensure continuity in its activities. Unless there is a new Multiannual Framework in place by the beginning of 2013, the FRA can only work if there is a specific request from an institution."*

**Disappointment at ECJ Strasbourg Ruling**

Some EFA MEPs expressed disappointment at December's court decision which favours the European Parliament's wasteful monthly visits to Strasbourg.

The decision by the European Court of Justice to uphold a complaint brought by France was widely anticipated. MEPs had sought to reduce their number of annual visits to Strasbourg by combining two in a single month. This was seen as an important first step in doing away with a practice which sees thousands of MEPs and staff decamp from Brussels to Strasbourg for three days per month. The cost to Europe's taxpayer is estimated at upwards of 180 million euros per year, and the environmental impact is significant.

Flemish nationalist Frieda Brepoels (N-VA) commented: *"I'm disappointed but not surprised by today's ruling. We must as MEPs continue opposing this wasteful and unnecessary monthly visit to Strasbourg.*

*"I have always said that Strasbourg is a beautiful city which has been a historically important symbol of European peace and reunification. But that alone is no longer reason enough for an entire parliament and its staff to change cities for just three days each month. A constructive alternative option for the Strasbourg region should be investigated. Whilst I respect the position of the French government, it is an attack on democracy to insist that the elected European Parliament may not choose where it meets. We will continue working within the 'single seat' group to reduce parliament's visits to Strasbourg."*

Plaid MEP Jill Evans (Plaid Cymru) said: *"The European Parliament's moves between Brussels and Strasbourg are financially and environmentally indefensible. Most MEPs do not support this wasteful practice and are demanding the parliament has a single seat. My constituents are horrified to hear about the money wasted in this way. Abolishing the monthly Strasbourg session would save around 180 million euros per year. It would also significantly reduce our carbon footprint. Estimates have put the environmental impact of the monthly move at around 19,000 tonnes of CO2 per year.*

*"We must have an alternative. We will keep campaigning until this pointless practice ends."*

Key Facts:

* 88 per cent of MEPs voted for a single seat in October this year

* 1.27 million European have signed a petition calling for a single seat in Brussels

* France is set to halve its three year subsidy to Strasbourg's European activities, from 117m to 47m euros

**Evans highlights EU membership benefits**

Plaid MEP Jill Evans took part in a key debate at the Strasbourg plenary session on the outcomes of the recent EU summit.

Ms Evans has recently published a report explaining that everyone in Wales is £40 a year better off thanks to the EU.

*"I represent Wales which, unlike the UK, is a net beneficiary of EU membership. We receive high levels of funding because of our weak economy marginalised by successive UK governments. Our economy would suffer even more if cuts were made to the EU budget, but I would like to come back to the issue of employment.*

*"To create jobs and growth, Wales has to work in close partnership with other EU nations. Like them, we have ideas and we have potential, we want a national powerhouse for green energy focused on our own energy needs and reinvested in the Welsh national interest. No country can be insulated from the economic crisis. We can build the economy, but a really solid commitment to creating jobs is essential."*

**Reactions vary to 8 hour animal transport limit**

MEPs approved a resolution calling for a reconsideration of limiting animal transport journey times to eight hours.

Flemish representative Frieda Brepoels welcomed the vote. Frieda said: *"The EU has set standards for the welfare of animals in transit since as far back as 1977. These were last updated in 2005 but a recent Commission report showed that serious problems exist. Implementation in various member states is patchy, and there are big differences in enforcement, inspections and sanctions. All too often the law is not being properly enforced and this has serious consequences for animal welfare."*

Plaid MEP Jill Evans was also supportive of an eight hour limit. Jill said: *"During my time as an MEP, I have campaigned for improved animal welfare standards across the European Union. The proposal to set an eight-hour limit on journeys follows a successful campaign by animal welfare charities which guaranteed the support of a majority of MEPs as well as over a million citizens across Europe. I have been contacted by hundreds of constituents from Wales who have been supporters of this campaign. Most, if not all, farmers in Wales are within eight hours of a slaughterhouse which means that this proposal is practical while guaranteeing that animals are not transported unnecessarily across the continent. While the report adopted today could have been stronger, I am happy that it means the debate on animal transport times continues."*

But SNP MEP Alyn Smith expressed disappointment. Alyn said: *"I'm proud of Scotland's high animal welfare standards, and while I'm always up for being better, we need laws that work in the real world. Scotland's farmers will be disappointed to hear that the attempt to put in place an 8 hour limit has still not been entirely killed off, although to be honest I don't expect the Commission to take much notice of such a weak demand hedged by caveats about the need to put science first. Commissioner Borg made it clear in the debate that 8 hours is not on his agenda.*

*"I also took some exception to suggestions from some MEPs that this was about putting money before welfare. Twaddle. An 8 hour limit is unscientific, bears no relation to the actual stress animals are under - as all the evidence points to the key issues being loading and unloading - the temperature and conditions of transport and, indeed, the conditions of the road and the temperature. I can vouch for it myself - three hours on the road to Skye is a lot more picturesque but a lot more stressful than three hours on the M9! A blanket 8 hour limit would put big chunks of Scotland effectively off limits for livestock production - an outcome nobody wants - and I am confident that the new Commissioner will bear that in mind as we try to take forward the real and serious issues about enforcement of the current rules."*

**French beer tax questioned**

N-VA MEP Frieda Brepoels has questioned the legality of a huge increase in excise duty on beer imposed by France.

The French parliament approved a 160 per cent increase earlier this month. Duty on beer is now between

ten and sixteen times higher than that on wine. Brepoels called the measure disproportionate and potentially in conflict with EU law. She said that it gave wine an unfair competitive advantage over beer.

France is the main export market for Belgian beer. Brepoels has tabled an urgent question to the European Commission on the legality of the French move, and its compatibility with EU single market requirements.

**Better airports measures backed**

International competition between airports and airlines has proved to be a source of difficulty in many EU countries. In December the European Parliament approved the European Commission's 'better airports' package which seeks to better organise air transport in Europe, in particular in terms of slot allocation and ground handling services.

Frieda Brepoels commented: *"The proposed measures must better equip European airports to deal with international competition by making better use of existing capacity, improving service quality, and reducing delays. The EU Commission's own figures show that EU airspace will be saturated by 2030, but that this will mostly be due to problems on the ground. That's why we need urgent progress towards legislation dealing with slot allocation, noise levels and ground handling organisation."*

The reports on slot allocation and noise levels were adopted, while the file on ground handling was referred back to the Parliament's Transport Committee. Eventually an agreement will have to be reached with the Council.

**Basque politicians' letter on EU institutions and Basque peace**

More than a year since the signing of the historic Gernika agreement that brought peace to the Basque Country, and in the light of recent elections, Basque politicians visited the European Parliament in Strasbourg at the invitation of MEPs from the parliament's Basque Friendship Group.

They published a letter addressed to the European Council, Commission and Parliament calling for concrete support from the EU for the Basque peace process. The letter was presented at a press conference in the European Parliament by Lorena Lopez de la Calle (EA), Maite Aristegi (Amaiur), Jon Inarritu (Amaiur - Aralar) and Igor Urrutikoetxea (LAB trade union) on behalf of the political, union and social organisations who signed the Gernika Agreement.

MEPs Francois Alfonsi, Ana Miranda and Tatjana Zdanoka, all members of the EP's Basque Friendship Group, took part in the press conference and met the delegation. The delegation also met Hannes Swoboda, President of the Socialist Group, and visited the Council of Europe. In their letter to Van Rompuy, Barroso and Schultz, they make the following concrete points:

1. That the European Union invite Member States France and Spain to deal with the consequences of the Basque conflict by applying international dispute-resolution standards.

2. Should they not do so, that the European Union lead that phase of the peace process which consists of settling the conflict, as a party involved in it.

3. That the Union call upon the States to undertake to respect human rights, to desist from resorting to emergency legislation, and to comply with and implement the ECHR's rulings.

**Green light for European patent**

The European Parliament in December gave its approval to the long awaited European patent. The

development was welcomed by N-VA MEP Frieda Brepoels.

Frieda commented: *"This simplification of what has been a very fragmented system involving the Member States has been a long time coming, but it is absolutely necessary. The European patent system will apply in every EU country except Spain and Italy. This is expected to reduce costs for users of the patent system by up to 80% and significantly improve the free movement of goods within the internal market."*

The EU has been trying to establish a single European patent for decades. Such a patent may co-exist alongside national patents and European patents granted by the European Patent Office under the European Patent Convention, which will afterwards still need to be validated in each member state.

Speaking in the debate, Jill Evans said: "I do not have to tell colleagues here that there is a huge debate in the UK on its future membership of the EU and this is a crucial time, when decisions have to be based on the needs and wishes of the people we represent.

**Recommended**

Press release

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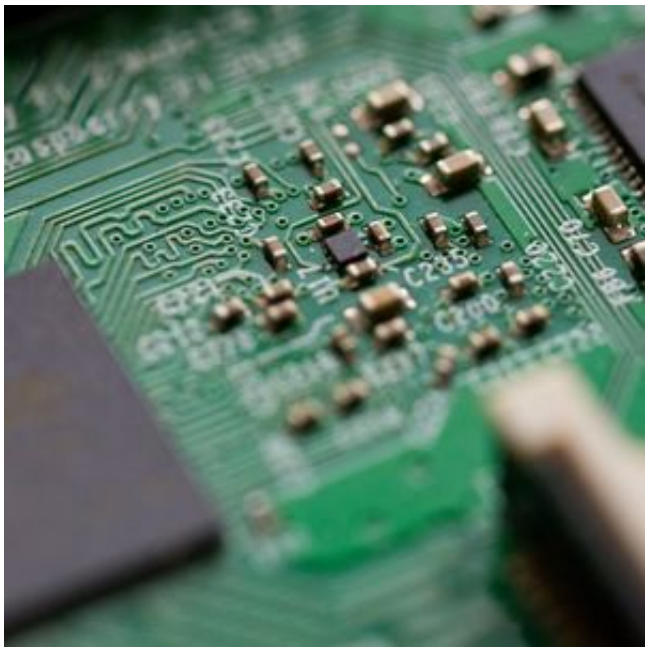


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