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e-fa: News Round-Up

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

October 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:

- Local election triumph for Flemish nationalists
- Elections in Spain's autonomous communities
- Fishing in national waters
- EFA MEPs visit West Bank and East Jerusalem
- EFA MEPs oppose trade agreement
- The role of nations and regions in the recovery strategy
- Off-shore oil and gas safety
- Aiete anniversary - Basque peace process

Local election triumph for Flemish nationalists

Flemish nationalists N-VA triumphed in local and provincial elections in Flanders on 14 October. EFA MEP Frieda Brepoels was elected mayor of her home town of Bilzen whilst party leader Bart De Wever triumphed in Antwerp.

The party was able to consolidate its successes at earlier elections in 2010 and build strong and significant support at local level, leading to the biggest win at local level in Belgium for almost seventy years.

Two sets of elections were held. At municipal level the N-VA was the second largest party, scoring 24% of the popular vote, whilst at provincial level the Flemish nationalists were the largest party with over 28% of the vote.

N-VA will be part of the governing coalition in 112 Flemish municipal councils and will have at least 56 mayors. N-VA councillors now account for 1,680 persons, representing an increase of 1,464 compared to the last local elections.

The election results are seen by commentators as a defeat for the traditionally coloured parties in the Belgian federal government, lacking a Flemish majority. It is therefore patently obvious that "change" will be on the 2014 election agenda.

Elections in Spain's autonomous communities

Elections were also held in the Basque Country and Galicia, whilst Catalonia goes to the polls on 25 November with pro-independence nationalists predicted to do well.

In the Basque Country, the left wing pro-independence coalition Bildu came a strong second to the ruling moderate nationalists of the PNV. There too, there is increased speculation of moves to hold an independence referendum with nationalist parties in a clear majority.

Nationalists fared less well in Galicia, where right wing Spanish unionists of the Partido Popular returned to government.

In Brussels, Catalan President Artur Mas of leading nationalist party Convergencia gave a keynote speech explaining his plans to hold a referendum on Catalan independence if given a mandate at this month's elections. His message was emphatically pro-European and he reminded listeners that Catalunya is a nation "that feels, and wants to continue to feel, European on account of its history, its traditions and its vocation. A nation that expects Europe not to let it down."

Unanimous backing for local control of fishing in national waters

SNP President **Ian Hudghton** welcomed the European Parliament's unanimous backing for legislation renewing the twelve mile limit for fishing in coastal waters. In a rare display of political harmony, MEPs voted with total unanimity in favour of the legislation, 658 votes in favour, with no abstentions or votes against.

The urgent legislation was presented to the European Parliament by the SNP MEP, who as 'rapporteur' was responsible for steering the law through parliament. Current legislation enshrining the twelve mile limit had been due to expire at the end of this year.

The legislation means that EU members will retain control of fisheries within their national waters. There have been several recent confrontations in EU waters even when boats have been fishing quite legally outside the twelve mile limit. This has made renewing the legislation all the more urgent.

Speaking after the vote, Ian contrasted the success of local control of fisheries in national waters with the failed, Brussels-controlled Common Fisheries Policy. He called for lessons to be learned in the current process of reforming the CFP, and for real decentralisation to take place.

Ian commented: *"The twelve mile limit and local control of fisheries has worked successfully for almost forty years. Contrast that with the disastrous Common Fisheries Policy, derided by fishermen, consumers, environmentalists, and now even the European Commission, as a failure. Centralised control of Europe's fisheries by Brussels has had a disastrous impact on fish stocks, on the industry as a whole, and on consumer confidence."*

EFA MEPs visit West Bank and East Jerusalem

In early October EFA MEPs **François Alfonsi**, **Jill Evans** and **Ana Miranda** visited the West Bank and East Jerusalem on a fact finding mission organised in conjunction with the Centre for European Palestinian Relations.

The visit helped the MEPs 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. They saw for themselves the effects of settlement building, visited a refugee camp and held meetings with local politicians and NGOs.

The MEPs updated a video blog of their visit. [Click here to follow the visit](#)

EFA MEPs speak out against ACAA

The EU should not upgrade relations with Israel whilst its government fails to make progress in building peace with the Palestinians, according to EFA MEPs after a vote to approve a new trade agreement on pharmaceutical products in Strasbourg in mid October.

Known as ACAA the vote relates to the EU - Israel agreement on the mutual recognition of certificates in medicinal products. The deal means that medicinal or pharmaceutical products authorised in the EU would have the same status in Israel, and vice versa. Supporters see the agreement as a way of boosting trade and removing commercial barriers, but opponents fear it will undermine EU efforts in support of the Israeli - Palestinian peace process.

EFA MEPs **Jill Evans**, **Francois Alfonsi** and **Ana Miranda** who recently returned from a fact finding trip to the West Bank and East Jerusalem said they were shocked at the scale of illegal Israeli settlement building in Palestinian territory and its implications for creating a viable Palestinian state in the future.

Welsh MEP and EFA Group President **Jill Evans** spoke in the debate in the European Parliament. Jill said: *"The European Union rightly criticises the Israeli government's violation of international law as regards its occupation of Palestine, but when it comes to taking action, it is less forthright."*

Galician nationalist MEP **Ana Miranda** commented: *"I'm against this agreement because the European Parliament has to send a clear signal to the Government of Israel: they cannot violate human rights, the rights of Palestinian people with impunity, without any consequences. Palestinian people are suffering because of segregation, loss of basic rights, and suffering due to an apartheid regime imposed by the state of Israel. Our vote against this commercial agreement is a gesture in favour of the right of Palestinians to live in peace and with the same rights as Israeli people."*

Strengthening the Role of Nations and Regions in the Recovery Strategy

A seminar held jointly with the European Alliance group in the Committee of the Regions, emphasised that Europe's nations and regions have a major role to play in building economic recovery and growth. The seminar was held at the Committee of the Regions in Brussels as part of European Week of Regions and Cities and featured speakers from Flanders, Wales, the Basque Country and Scotland.

President of the EFA Group in the European Parliament **Jill Evans** said: *"The role of nations and regions and their own devolved governments in economic recovery is today in sharper focus than ever before. Targeted intervention at regional and national level can have a significant impact on economic recovery; it can mean the difference between remaining in work or facing unemployment."*

Vice President of the EA Group of the Committee of the Regions, the SNP's **Stewart Maxwell MSP** said: *"The devolved Governments of the EU's nations and regions are absolutely central to Europe's overall economic recovery. With the UK in a double dip recession, and the EU nations coping with stagnating growth, it is clear that the voices of Europe's small nations must be heard. We are best placed to determine how best to stimulate growth, protect the most vulnerable in our society and create lasting, sustainable solutions to Europe's economic difficulties."*

Common sense victory for off-shore oil and gas safety

SNP MEP **Alyn Smith** welcomed the sensible move by the European Parliament to turn proposed new EU-wide offshore oil and gas safety rules from a stringent regulation into a more legally flexible directive. Alyn, the sole Scots member of the Parliament's Energy Committee has previously brought together industry experts and Commission officials to discuss the issue, and lodged the amendment to turn the proposals into the form of a directive.

Commenting on the decision taken by the committee in early October, Alyn said: *"This is a victory for common sense. The proposed new EU-wide rules would be of the detriment to our already high standards in the North Sea. The adoption of the amendment is proof that the engagement strategy with workers and the industry has borne fruit. We all share the same concerns, and we are all committed to ensuring the highest health and safety and environmental standards possible. In Scotland, we take the issue very seriously indeed; having learnt from previous disasters such as Piper Alpha."*

Aiete anniversary marked in Strasbourg

Meeting in Strasbourg in mid October, the European Parliament's Basque Friendship Group, which includes several EFA MEPs as well as others from various political groups supporting the Basque peace process, released a statement commemorating the first anniversary of the Aiete peace agreement.

The group noted recent political developments in the Basque Country and the EU's award of the Nobel peace prize. They called on the EU to live up to the challenge of supporting the establishment of a lasting peace in the Basque Country.

In a statement published after the meeting attended by EFA MEPs **Ana Miranda, François Alfonsi, Tatjana Ždanoka** and others they said:

"This award must now be an incentive for the EU to contribute to resolving the conflict in the Basque Country. Taking into account the resolution on the Basque peace process adopted by the EU parliament on October 2006, we ask the European Parliament, the Commission and the Council to become actively involved in promoting the Basque peace process in order to resolve the last ongoing armed conflict inside the EU."

"The award of the the Nobel Peace Prize to the European Union takes place against the backdrop of social conflict in many parts of Europe. However, the EU has helped to end war between historic enemies and has contributed to conflict resolution within certain member states."

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