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e-fa: News Round-Up

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

June/July 2013 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)
François Alfonsi MEP - U Partitu di a Nazione Corsa - Europe Ecologie
Mark Demesmaeker MEP - Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie
Inaki Irazabalbeitia MEP - Aralar
Ana Miranda MEP - Bloque Nacionalista Galego
Alyn Smith MEP - Scottish National Party
Tatjana Ždanoka MEP - For Human Rights in a United Latvia



Highlights include:

- New EFA MEP
- Support for endangered languages
- EFA visit to the Basque Country
- CAP reform
- Tobacco smuggling
- PRISM
- Latvia's Euro membership
- Schengen border system
- Developing co-operatives

New EFA MEP

The EFA Group in the European Parliament has welcomed **Inaki Irazabalbeitia** from the Basque political movement Aralar as its newest MEP.

Mr Irazabalbeitia joins the EFA Group this week, replacing Ana Miranda of the Bloque Nacionalista Galego (BNG).

Aralar is a left-wing nationalist Basque political movement which seeks sovereignty for the Basque Country through peaceful democratic means, and which identifies itself as socialist, feminist, environmentalist and internationalist.

Inaki Irazabalbeitia is a Doctor of Chemistry and head of external relations for Aralar.

EFA Group President **Jill Evans MEP** (Plaid Cymru) said: *"We're delighted to welcome a Basque member to the EFA group in the European Parliament. It is an exciting time for progressive, democratic nationalism in Europe and in all our nations and regions."*

Inaki Irazabalbeitia said: *"The Basque peace process is currently in an impasse because of the attitude of Spanish government. Aralar thinks that European authorities could help to change that attitude. So, one of my duties here at the EP will be to lobby in that sense".*

The defence of both the welfare state and the cultural, linguistic and political rights of minorities are also a priority for Irazabalbeitia.

Strong support for endangered languages

A report calling for more support for Europe's endangered languages by EFA MEP **François Alfonsi** won unanimous support in the European Parliament's Culture Committee in June.

This is the European Parliament's first major work on language diversity in many years. The report regrets the drastic cuts to EU funding available for promoting language diversity over the past decade. It calls on the EU and its Member States to 'commit wholeheartedly to a policy of protection and promotion that is up to the job of preserving the diversity of the EU's linguistic and cultural heritage by supporting ambitious protection policies within the language communities concerned.'

It also calls on the EU to support a language policy that 'enables children to acquire two mother tongues from the very earliest age.'

The committee considered over 170 amendments to the report, before approving it by 30 votes to zero in a rare display of unanimity on what is often a politically contentious issue.

François Alfonsi said afterwards: *"This unanimous vote underlines the European Parliament's commitment to cultural diversity. Whilst Europe fights for cultural diversity on an international level, we owe it to ourselves to be a shining example of diversity here in our own communities. That commitment to cultural diversity certainly exists in some European countries, though less so in others. All European member states should evolve and adopt the best European standards in this area."*

The final report will be voted upon by the full Parliament later this year.

EFA Visit to the Basque Country

Some MEPs from the EFA Group in the European Parliament visited the Basque Country in June. The visit had a focus on economic innovation, and how small nations and regions could be innovators in stimulating economic growth.

There was also a focus on the co-operative movement, high-tech innovation and green jobs. The group visited the well-known Mondragon co-operative federation which employs over 80,000 people.

The Basque Country seems to have bucked the trend in some respects and is by far outperforming Spain in economic terms. Whilst unemployment in Spain currently stands at 27.2%, in the Basque Country this is significantly less at 13.8%.

The MEPs also held talks at the Basque Parliament.

President of the EFA Group in the European Parliament, **Jill Evans MEP** said: "Revitalising the economy is our top priority and the Basque Country is a good example of what can be done in transforming a small country economy.

"We met key players to discuss their economic success and what lessons we can learn from that. The story of how Mondragon grew into the world's largest worker co-operative employing over 80,000 employees in 256 companies will be of great interest to us."

MEPs **François Alfonsi, Mark Demesmaeker, Tatjana Ždanoka** with **Inaki Irazabalbeitia** also raised the issue of political prisoners, and the need to resolve this issue as part of the peace process. They expressed their regret at being refused permission by Spanish authorities to meet Basque political prisoners.

Mark Demesmaeker raised the issue in the European Parliament's July plenary session in Strasbourg. Speaking in Parliament, he said: *"The way Spain deals with Basque political prisoners has long been controversial. There are reports of violations of human rights, the specific prison regime, and the detention of terminally ill people. Some of us tried last week to visit one of the prisons and see the situation for ourselves, but the Spanish authorities refused access. The way we as MEPs have been treated by the Spanish government is simply outrageous. I urge the President of this Parliament to take up this matter with them."*

Deal reached on CAP reform

EFA MEPs **Alyn Smith** and **Jill Evans** responded to the deal struck on CAP reform between the European Council, Parliament and Commission.

The conclusion of negotiations on the reformed CAP sets the agenda for Europe's agricultural policy until

2020. Several key areas are yet to be finally concluded as they are dependent on the outcome of talks on the EU's long term budget. These include capping, the flexibility between pillars, co-financing rates, and external convergence.

Whilst no final vote in the European Parliament is expected before September, the broad structure of the new CAP is now clearer.

Agriculture Committee member and SNP MEP Alyn Smith said: *"This has been a long time coming but, on balance, I can recommend this package to the people of Scotland.There are parts I like more than others, and I still despair at the conscious choice of the UK government to sacrifice farming in favour of the UK rebate, but we will do what we can to fight rural Scotland's corner. The numbers are far from final, but it is quite clear that the UK government has chosen to deliver a very poor outcome in financial terms compared to other Member States who value farming. There is no doubt in my mind that Scotland could have won a better budget deal."*

Plaid Cymru MEP Jill Evans said: *"These negotiations are the latest steps towards determining the future of CAP payments for Welsh farmers. The crucial vote will be in September, when we will know what the financial settlement is and what the future holds for our agriculture industry. There were few real surprises, but it is worth noting that in terms of 'greening', farmers will have greater flexibility to choose alternative measures from an equivalence list approved by the EU Commission. There is also more flexibility in the move towards area payments, and the young farmers' scheme will have to take up a minimum 2 per cent of direct payments. This renewed focus on making support available to young farmers and new entrants is particularly welcome. It's now absolutely vital that we fight any cut in the overall EU long term budget."*

Illegal tobacco smuggling

SNP President **Ian Hudghton MEP** welcomed a new package of measures adopted by the European Commission in June to tackle the illicit tobacco trade.

This trade is said to cost EU countries around ten billion euros annually in lost revenue. It also undermines efforts to reduce smoking and improve public health.

Ian said he was hopeful the package of measures could be used to support the Scottish Government's ambitious target of a tobacco free Scotland by 2034.

The measures include greater cross border cooperation between customs authorities to tackle what has become a massive illicit trade. There will also be funding available for authorities in EU countries particularly affected by the problems of tobacco smuggling.

Ian said: *"European level co-operation could prove useful in helping the Scottish Government achieve its targets in reducing the number of people who smoke.*

"I welcome these very sensible proposals by the European Commission. Tobacco smuggling not only makes it harder to reduce smoking levels, it also deprives countries of up to 10 billion euros a year in tax revenue. "This is one area where good co-operation between the Scottish Government and European Commission can be of help in improving public health in Scotland and elsewhere."

PRISM: MEPs demand answers

EFA MEPs including **Mark Demesmaeker** (Flanders) and **Jill Evans** (Wales) demanded answers about the controversial PRISM programme. This has seen the US National Security Agency accused of snooping on telephone and internet communications in Europe. The programme is said to allow United States

intelligence services access to private online communications through the world's biggest internet companies. These include Microsoft, Yahoo, Google, Facebook, YouTube, Skype, AOL and Apple.

The matter was the subject of an urgent debate in the European Parliament in Strasbourg.

Welsh MEP Jill Evans said: *"These revelations raise fundamental questions about democracy and privacy. I share the outrage of many people that US intelligence agencies apparently have easy access to our online personal data. Mass surveillance of citizens is unacceptable. We have to ensure that we adopt the strictest data protection standards in the EU in response to this. We have to have the assurance that our privacy is not being breached. So many of us depend on the convenience of communicating online and we want to continue to do that in the knowledge that the system is not being abused. "*

Flemish MEP **Mark Demesmaeker** said: *"The existence of such a programme may come as no great surprise, but it is disappointing that Europe has been left in the dark about this for so long by a traditional ally. This is all the more unfortunate when we remember that President Obama promised a break with the habits of the Bush era. Yet we see that Guantanamo remains open and that unmanned drones are still killing innocent victims. And now the US administration seems implicated in a huge digital espionage operation that invades the private lives of many in Europe. For a President who boasted of the need to return to multilateralism, this is hardly something to be proud of."*

Latvia's Euro membership

Latvia is scheduled to join the European single currency in 2014. But the decision which got the green light from the European Parliament at its July plenary isn't without controversy.

Polls show that a majority of Latvians are sceptical about joining, and there are calls for a referendum.

Latvian MEP **Tatjana Ždanoka** raised the issue in a debate with the incoming Lithuanian EU Presidency at the July Strasbourg Plenary session.

Addressing Lithuanian President Grybauskaite, Tatjana Ždanoka said: *"I would like to congratulate President Grybauskaite with this very important occasion. These six months will be very important for the European Union because finally we have realised that we have problems with domestic internal democracy when so far we have been teaching the world how to perform. Today we will vote on the recommendations for observing the rights of ethnic minorities in Hungary but there are problems with the rights of majorities as well. Before us we have a resolution about Latvia joining the Eurozone and the majority of Latvian citizens are against that.*

"Well the rights of minorities have been breached for twenty years already and we've seen an artificially created group of non-citizens, but to breach the rights of the majority that's something new in Latvia. The Latvian Minister of Finance who is visiting the European Parliament said yesterday 'even if there will be a referendum in Latvia concerning the introduction of the Euro it will not impede our implementation at all of the Euro in Latvia. But I wish all the best for the Lithuanian presidency."

Schengen border system

The European Parliament at its June plenary session adopted legislative agreements on two files related to the Schengen border-free system. One dealt with the reintroduction of border controls and the other dealt with the evaluation of Schengen. The UK and Ireland are part of the EU but not of the Schengen border-free zone.

Commenting after the vote Latvian MEP **Tatjana Ždanoka** said: *"The European Parliament endorsed*

what amounts to a scaling-back of the EU's Schengen border free system. After having originally strongly protested against the plans, this climbdown is a major blow for this core EU policy and reflects poorly on the European Parliament and its credibility."

On the proposals on the reintroduction of border controls under Schengen, Tatjana Ždanoka continued: *"EU member states will retain final say over the reintroduction of border controls. This outcome is clearly at odds with the integrity of Schengen and flies in the face of the transnational nature of the border-free system. It is logical and essential that decisions to temporarily reintroduce border controls be subject to EU-level approval."*

Commenting on agreement on legislation regarding the evaluation of the application of Schengen, Tatjana Ždanoka added: *"While the new provisions providing for EU-level evaluation of Schengen are a positive, the agreement to change the legal base of the system with a view to excluding the European Parliament is nothing short of a scandal. The democratically-elected parliament should clearly have an equal role in evaluating such a core EU policy and the failure to ensure this is a blow to the EU's democratic process."*

Developing the potential of co-operatives

In a debate with the Lithuanian President Grybauskaite in Strasbourg in July, Welsh MEP **Jill Evans** called for greater recognition of the role of co-operatives. A report on the contribution they can make to overcoming the economic crisis was adopted by the European Parliament earlier. It examined the resilience of the co-operative model in times of economic uncertainty. Wales has a long history and strong tradition of co-operatism, and in the eyes of many, is the birthplace of the movement.

Jill Evans MEP said: *"I want to bring the cooperatives of Wales's long and rich industrial history into the present. Wales is the spiritual homeland of this very successful co-operative movement, and I believe we have the necessary enthusiasm, historical experience, and economic conditions to make co-operatives a real force for driving the growth of the Welsh economy.*

"We already have cooperatives in our country, and the Wales Co-operative Centre does excellent work in providing support and advice for these businesses. But I believe that with the help of the European Union we can encourage the growth of even more innovative businesses of this kind, and create a real culture of cooperation once again."

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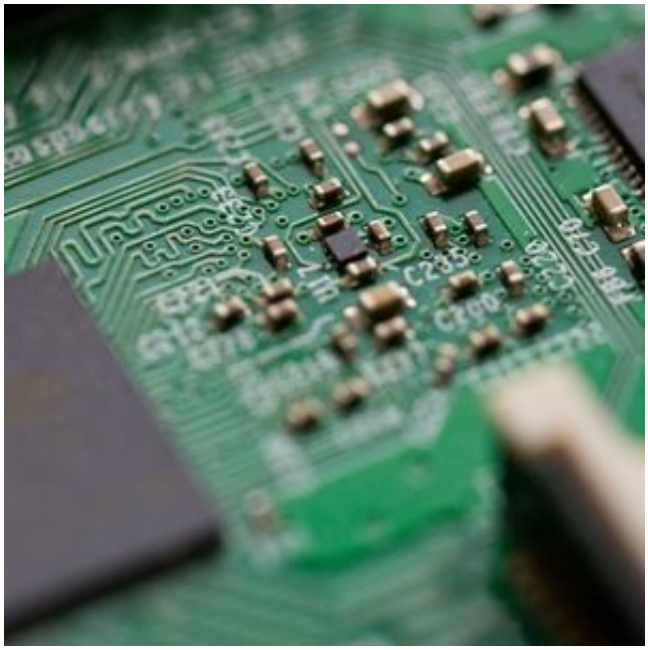


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