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e-fa: News Round Up

News Bulletin from the European Free Alliance Group in the European Parliament

February 2014 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
- **Alyn Smith MEP** - Scottish National Party
- **Tatjana Ždanoka MEP** - For Human Rights in a United Latvia



Highlights include:

- Basque Peace process
- Air Passenger Rights
- Welsh 'Great Train Robbery'
- New tobacco law
- Visa reforms
- MEP of the Year awards

Basque peace process moves forward

Several EFA MEPs gave their response to recent significant developments in the Basque peace process.

This includes notably the announcement of a beginning to disarmament by ETA and the subsequent interrogation of members of the independent International Verification Committee by the Spanish authorities. The MEPs who have been supporters of the peace process gave their response and outlined the challenges for the EU at a press conference in Strasbourg.

The MEPs taking part were François Alfonsi (Corsica), Mark Demesmaeker (Flanders), Inaki Irazabalbeitia (Basque Country) and Tatjana Zdanoka (Latvia).

Inaki Irazabalbeitia said: *"The International Verification Commission confirmed that ETA had placed a quantity of its arms beyond use and intended to fully disarm within a year. This is very good news and an important step forward.*

"Unfortunately the Spanish government's response has been predictably disappointing. They have failed to welcome or seize this opportunity and have instead taken the provocative act of summoning the International Verification Commission's inspectors to court. The French government has also failed to behave positively. This is in contrast to the Basque government whose President accompanied the inspectors to court. I call once more upon the European Union to engage in the Basque peace process. They cannot sit idly by as the Spanish and French governments continually block the path to peace."

François Alfonsi said: *"Following the EU Court of Justice ruling last year on prison sentences, the EU is already concerned with and involved in the Basque peace process. How can we tolerate that those international inspectors involved in bringing peace to the Basque Country should be summoned to court by the Spanish authorities? This behaviour runs totally contrary to European values. I welcome the steps taken by*

ETA and the Basque people to end violence and resolve this conflict peacefully, and I condemn the behaviour of the Spanish authorities."

Mark Demesmaeker said: *"The disarmament announcement was a significant step forward which Spain cannot ignore. The EU must engage in this peace process as it did in Northern Ireland and help the path to peace. There the EU helped with economic development and social projects, and it is now engaging in helping resolve conflicts worldwide. It's now time to engage in the Basque peace process. I propose that the EU should send a peace delegation to the Basque Country to help end Europe's last armed conflict."*

Tatjana Zdanoka said: *"We have all been following recent developments in Ukraine, and we should perhaps compare and contrast the EU's engagement there, and its silence on the Basque peace process. Has the EU done all it can to help the Basque Country at this time? The answer is clearly no. We ask the EU to become actively involved in helping bring peace to the Basque Country. We will table questions to the European Commission to ask what steps will be undertaken in that regard."*

Improved rights for air passengers

SNP MEP Ian Hudghton welcomed a vote at the European Parliament, in favour of improving proposals by the European Commission to give compensation and assistance to passengers in the event of denied boarding and of cancellation or long delay of flights.

This will ensure that all airports that host more than 1.5 million passengers per year have contingency plans in the event of mass cancellations to provide them with information and assistance.

For the first time, a definite right to compensation will be founded if a flight is delayed by several hours. This right is triggered if a flight of less than 3500km is delayed by 3 hours, if a flight of 3500-6000km is delayed by 5 hours, or a longer distance flight is delayed by 7 hours.

Compensation will be €300 for flights of less than 2500km, €400 for flights of 2500-6000km, and €600 for longer flights.

Furthermore, clear rights are to be introduced in the event of 'tarmac delays', and for how air carriers should respond if accommodation and transport arrangements are required in the event of a delay.

The European Parliament First Reading position now requires negotiation with the European Council and European Commission before becoming European legislation.

Ian Hudghton said: *"This vote confirms several necessary rights for passengers who may face long and frustrating delays out-with their control. I'm sure many people remember the travel chaos that occurred following the Icelandic volcano incident of 2010 for example, and this news should assure passengers that in future should such an event occur again that there will be specific assistance and compensation rights available."*

Welsh 'Great Train Robbery'

Plaid MEP Jill Evans criticised Welsh and UK Governments for 'lacking the ambition and vision' to develop Wales' railway network. Jill described their failure to take advantage of European funding opportunities to help develop the railways as the 'Welsh great train robbery'.

Jill spoke out as the European Parliament backed a raft of reforms in February to the way the railways are regulated across Europe. The MEP welcomed plans to improve railway safety but urged caution on EU moves to open up domestic rail services to more competition. But she said that EU moves to improve both

passenger and freight services could come to nothing in Wales due to the 'lack of ambition' of the Welsh and UK Governments.

Jill Evans has been campaigning for more investment in Welsh railways. In November, the Plaid MEP uncovered how Wales had been deliberately left off the TEN-T map for priority EU funding by the UK government and the Welsh government had allowed this to happen. The EU's TEN-T programme for developing cross-border transport links is worth £21bn. There are no main corridor routes in Wales but there is a secondary network of core routes that can be developed.

There is also a new EU programme to fund railway modernisation known as Shift2Rail. Worth over £840m over the next seven years, it will provide funding for research and innovation to develop Europe's railway networks for both passengers and freight. At present rail carries only 10% of freight and 6% of passengers. The new scheme will be a public-private partnership with rail companies and rolling stock manufacturers. In the UK, Network Rail has already pledged a reported £25m pounds towards a package that will be match funded by the European Commission.

Jill Evans said: *"The Welsh government lacks the ambition and vision to realise the potential of our railways. Commission officials in Brussels have confirmed to me that they would have welcomed applications for some of the funding available to improve Welsh railways, but in recent years none were forthcoming.*

"The Welsh government should be seizing these investment opportunities, but instead they are letting them pass-by. It is nothing less than a Welsh Great Train Robbery – and it's the people of Wales who are being robbed. We can make Europe work for Wales if we work directly with the European Commission on schemes like this. Plaid Cymru will be looking for every opportunity for Wales."

New tobacco law to put youngsters off smoking

With 94% of smokers having their first cigarette before their 25th birthday, making smoking unattractive to youngsters is a key aim of a stronger EU law on tobacco products.

The new law had the full backing of former smoker and N-VA MEP **Mark Demesmaeker**, who is also a member of the Parliament's Public Health Committee.

Mark said: *"In the EU, more than 700,000 people die every year because of tobacco, almost the same as the total number of people living in both Gent and Antwerp. In order to discourage smoking, tobacco should look and taste like tobacco. In the future, health warnings across the EU will be more visible on the packaging and flavouring will be banned."*

The key changes are:

· 65% of packaging must carry a mix of text and visual warnings. Packets must contain a minimum of 20 cigarettes.

· Flavours will be banned

· E-cigarettes can contain no more than 20mg/ml of nicotine and may be classed as tobacco products or health products.

Visa requirements for third country nationals

The Parliament approved visa free travel to the Schengen area for nationals of a number of third countries at its February plenary. The most significant of these was Moldova, which is the first of the EU's Eastern

Partnership countries to meet the requirements for visa free travel to the EU. This was supported by EFA MEP **Tatjana Zdanoka**. But Tatjana also raised concerns about the EU's arrangements for issuing Schengen visas.

Speaking in the debate, Tatjana said: *"It is clear that in many third countries the current consular coverage is not satisfactory. It creates an additional necessity to rely on external service providers and commercial intermediaries. It seems that, contrary to the Visa Code, such a practice is not the last resort, as we wanted it to be. Such shortcomings should be addressed in the review of the Visa Code.*

"The common application centres are a useful tool which should become standard in the future, but for the time being there are too few of them. Member States are not very interested, despite the possibility of obtaining co-financing from the External Borders Fund. We also regret that the Commission has not presented the study on the possibility of a common European issuing mechanism for short-term visas."

Alyn nominated in "MEP of the year" awards

SNP MEP **Alyn Smith** has been nominated in the prestigious 'Parliament Magazine MEP Awards 2014' for his work on the Parliament's Agriculture Committee. He is up against two other MEPs for the award of Agriculture MEP of the year.

Alyn said: *"I've been proud to work with and for Scottish Agriculture over the years to sell the good news story that is Scottish Farming. Scotland is a team game and I've been lucky to have a great team around me and a great group of folks back home, from the National Sheep Association, Scottish Association of Meat Wholesalers, Scottish Organic Producers Association, the National Farmers' Union, Scotland Food and Drink and a cast of thousands.*

"The awards are a bit of fun, but any chance to put Scotland on the map will be taken up and this in a small way recognises the contribution we were able to make on behalf of Scotland's farmers in the drafting of the Rural Development package, which was finally voted through at the end of 2013 and the Scottish government is now working on implementing. I truly believe the Rural Development package opens the door to a lot of good things in terms of funding better farming practices, especially on farmscale renewable energy, local abattoirs, short supply chains and local branding, and I was proud to see it voted through."

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Press release

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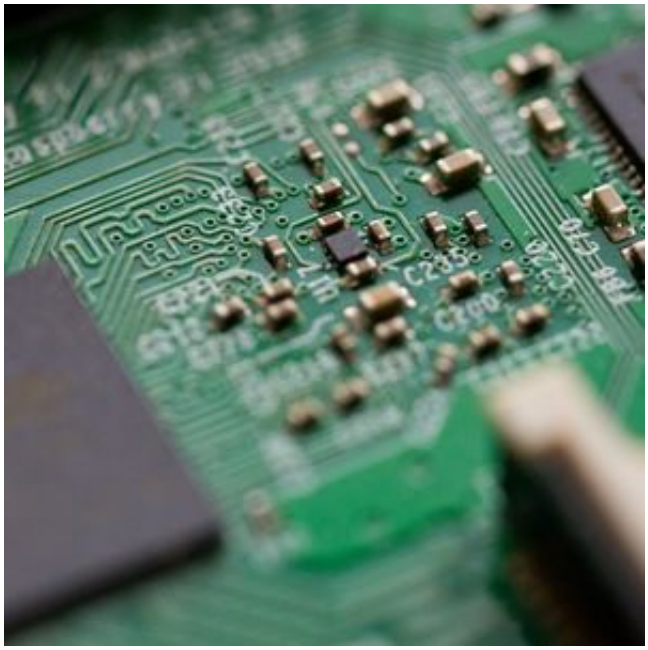


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