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News | 23.02.2012

e-fa: News Round-Up February 2012

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

February 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:

- Fiscal federalism in the EU
- Scottish independence sets no precedent
- PIP Breast Implants
- EU 'power-grab' harming Scotland's fishing communities
- Morocco, trade and the Arab spring
- Latvia's language referendum
- Blind access to books
- Ana's first plenary intervention
- Food Aid in Europe
- Call for more focus on social problems facing athletes
- 2012 - Year of active ageing

- Disappointment with dairy farming vote

Fiscal federalism in the EU

EFA MEPs **Frieda Brepoels** and **Alyn Smith** joined forces with other progressive nationalists to back an amendment to the EU's Annual Tax Report supporting the concept of fiscal federalism. The potential economic benefits of enabling constitutional regions and nations within member states to have powers over tax and expenditure is becoming more widely acknowledged at EU level.

The nationalist amendment added the following statement to the Annual Tax Report: *"Fiscal federalism can be a useful tool in achieving accountability in fiscal management at regional level and in this regard can improve economic efficiency."*

Scottish independence sets no precedent

Scottish independence would set no precedent for other European countries. That was the clear message that Scotland's Deputy First Minister Nicola Sturgeon had for international journalists in Brussels.

Questioned directly on whether developments in Scotland could be seen as setting a precedent with regard to other European member states with pro-independence movements, Ms Sturgeon was unequivocal: *"It would not set any precedent in other parts of Europe. There is a particular set of circumstances in the United Kingdom."*

PIP Breast Implants

N-VA MEP **Frieda Brepoels**, a member of the Parliament's Environment and Public Health committee, has called for better control and traceability at EU level following the public health scandal surrounding dangerous breast implants.

An estimated 500,000 women, mostly outside the EU, are affected due to problems with the French implant manufacturer PIP.

Brepoels backed calls for the European Commission to investigate whether the EU directive on medical devices has been broken. Frieda commented: *"Greater control and traceability are vital to patient safety. Only products that meet the criteria should be allowed to enter the market."*

EU 'power-grab' harming Scotland's fishing communities

SNP MEP and Party President **Ian Hudghton** accused the European Commission of attempting a 'power-grab' this month by retaining centralised control over fisheries policy in Brussels. The SNP MEP warned that the EU Commission is using a restrictive interpretation of the EU's Lisbon Treaty as justification for refusing to decentralise real control to Europe's fishing nations.

Ian was speaking in a debate at the European Parliament in Strasbourg with Europe's Fisheries Commissioner, Maria Damanaki. MEPs were debating the future reform of the Common Fisheries Policy, and in particular the need to recognise the public good provided by the fishing industry in terms of creating jobs in coastal communities and maintaining traditional ways of life.

Speaking in the debate, Ian said: *"Over the lifetime of the Common Fisheries Policy the European Commission and member state governments have gathered ever-more powers to themselves, and have extended the remit of the December Council of Ministers meeting far beyond deciding upon fishing*

opportunities. My constituents, in the fishing nation of Scotland, will not be impressed if CFP reform does not sweep away the failed practices which have so discredited the EU´s role in fisheries management.

"If environmental and social sustainability is to be achieved, I think that decentralisation must be at the top of the reform agenda, and that returning real power to Europe's fishing nations would ensure that those with most to gain from successful conservation - our fishing communities - would have the incentive to achieve success."

Morocco, trade and the Arab spring

EFA MEPs criticised the approval of a controversial agreement between the EU and Morocco to liberalise trade in agricultural and fisheries products.

Concerns remain that the agreement not only includes illegally occupied Western Sahara, but is also economically unsound. Little data has emerged about the real economic effects of the agreement on the European economy, whilst there are worries that Moroccan producers could face significant hardship from a surge in imports from Europe.

The European Parliament has to give its consent to trade agreements of this nature before they can take effect.

Speaking in the debate in Parliament, Galician MEP **Ana Miranda** said: *"This is a debate in which the European Parliament must give a clear political signal. There are two aspects to this. First, supporting agreements which promote farming models that are socially, economically and environmentally sustainable. Second, that these agreements should be in accordance with international law and should respect the human and collective rights of the people of Western Sahara."*

Frieda Brepoels also voiced concern: *"The Arab Spring should have taught us that more free trade with Arab countries must be looked at as part of a wider strategy. The region needs stable society based on democratic institutions and a local sustainable economy. I fear that this agreement is a missed opportunity to achieve this, and has been driven by purely short term political considerations rather than the best interests of the people of Europe, Morocco or indeed Western Sahara."*

Latvia's language referendum

Latvia voted this month in a referendum on giving Russian the status of second state language, a move supported by EFA MEP **Tatjana Ždanoka**. The referendum came as a result of a successful public petition to change the law. Tatjana invited a group of referendum supporters to Strasbourg keep MEPs informed. They made a presentation to the Parliament's Minorities Intergroup co-chaired by EFA MEP François Alfonsi.

Almost 44 per cent of those living in Latvia are Russian speakers, but around a third of these are denied citizenship - and with it the right to vote - due the country's controversial naturalisation laws.

In the event, around one quarter of those voting supported the proposal, with three quarters against. But the result was a mixed picture. A majority of voters in eastern Latvia supported the measure, with the country's second city also voting in favour.

Tatjana now intends to step-up campaigning to ensure that Latvia's 'non-citizens' can automatically be granted passports. Most of them are Russian speaking Latvians who do not fulfil the Latvian language requirements of citizenship.

Blind access to books

Frieda Brepoels supported moves to improve access to books and other printed materials for blind people. On 16 February MEPs backed a resolution calling for copyright exemptions for printed materials intended for blind people in the context of ongoing World Intellectual Property Organisation negotiations.

Frieda said: *"As things stand, books and other printed material are hardly accessible for blind and visually impaired people. Only 5% of publications are currently converted into an accessible format such as braille or audio. A clear international standard establishing an exemption from copyright for specific material intended for the blind and visually impaired would be a huge step forward. We have sent a clear signal to EU representatives in the current international copyright negotiations: a binding legal text is needed, rather than non-binding recommendations."*

Ana's first plenary intervention

In one of her first interventions in the chamber of the European Parliament, BNG MEP **Ana Miranda** took the opportunity of speaking her native Galician, with a few words of Catalan and Basque. The interpretation was turned off, but Ana made a stand for Europe's co-official languages, such as Basque, Galician, Welsh and Catalan which EFA wants to see used with interpretation in full meetings of the European Parliament.

Watch Ana speak at http://youtu.be/6vO5p2MxmZo

Food Aid in Europe

N-VA MEP **Frieda Brepoels** supported the European Parliament's decision to authorise the release of up to 500 million euros annually for food aid in 2012 and 2013, within the European Union. The decision has been held up for more than two years by wrangling in the Council of Ministers.

Frieda commented: *"Some 18 million people in Europe make use of food aid. Any abrupt end to this European support would be a severe blow to many families, in particular for single parent households. That would be totally unacceptable, particularly in this time of economic crisis."*

Frieda emphasised however that after 2013 a serious reform of the system will be mandatory: financing under the CAP will no longer be possible. Various options to continue the programme at EU level should be looked at. Of course, competent authorities in the Member States also have a responsibility, and policy measures to decrease the number of people needing food aid are equally important.

Call for more focus on social problems facing athletes

The European Parliament adopted a wide ranging set of recommendations to deal with the major challenges facing sport at European level. Measures to tackle hooliganism and violent behaviour as well as match fixing and illegal betting were supported by MEPs.

Latvian MEP **Tatjana Ždanoka** is a member of the European Parliament's Transport and Tourism Committee. Tatjana praised the recommendations but called for action at EU level to help sportspeople and professional athletes who face difficulties at the end of their careers. She also called for action to alleviate the financial burden on the lowest paid sportspeople, and for more support for traditional sport and games.

Tatjana said: *"Whilst we broadly welcome these proposals, some concerns still remain, particularly on social issues. We know, for example, that many sportsmen and women across Europe face economic difficulty at*

the end of their professional careers. This issue was raised specifically with me by trades unions from my own country, Latvia. If we are talking about the European dimension in sport then this is surely an area where the EU needs to take action. Europe has a social model which should also be promoted in the case of a specific category of employees such as professional athletes."

2012 - Year of active ageing

2012 is the European Year of Active Ageing and **Frieda Brepoels** has been involved in promoting greater understanding of the challenges of Parkinson's disease. The condition affects more than 1.2 million people in Europe.

Frieda recently hosted the first ever debate in the European Parliament on Parkinson's disease and wrote about it for the Parliament Magazine. You can read Frieda's article here
www.friedabrepoels.eu/citaten/time-act

Disappointment with dairy farming vote

SNP MEP **Alyn Smith** and Plaid's **Jill Evans** both voiced disappointment with the final legislative proposals for the milk sector, voted by the European Parliament this month. They were both particularly critical of the decision to drop a requirement for mandatory written contracts for dairy farmers which, they felt, would have helped ensure producers get a consistently fairer price for their milk.

The decision on mandatory written contracts will now be left to the member states, with a wide expectation that the UK government will opt out.

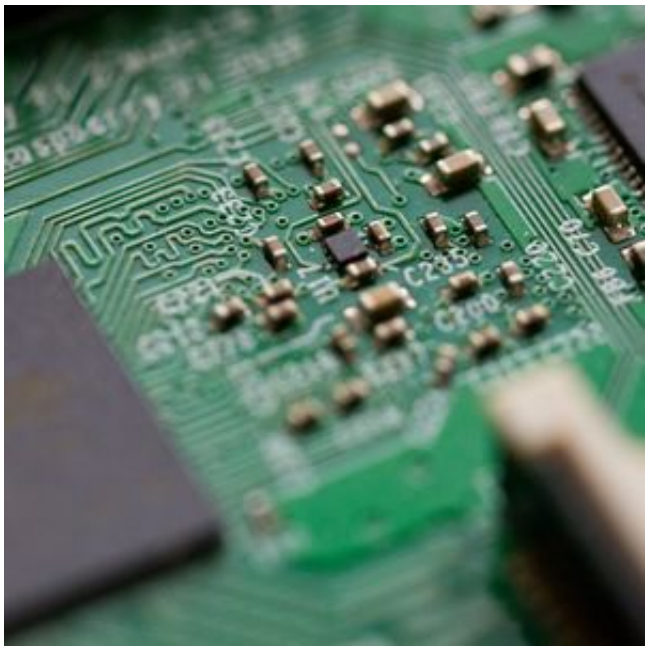
Speaking after the vote, Alyn commented: *"Scotland's dairy herd has fallen by 7% since 2007 and, combined with rising input costs, times are not easy for our dairy farmers. In particular, I'm extremely disappointed about the lack of mandatory written contracts. I am astonished that this does not already exist - it is the very basis of fair dealing between commercial partners, and it is disgraceful that many farmers do not even know what price they will get when they deliver their milk."*

Plaid's Jill Evans said: *"Six or seven dairy producers leave the industry every month in Wales. This is because for too long, the market has favoured the large supermarkets who can dictate the price of products and the terms under which they're produced.*

"I have spoken to many farmers who have told me that the relationship between farmers and those that buy the milk must be improved. Putting contracts in place would have been an opportunity to make the milk supply chain fairer. Instead, my colleagues in the Parliament and in national governments weakened the proposals. Milk contracts are now optional, with not enough rights for organisations to negotiate on behalf of their members."

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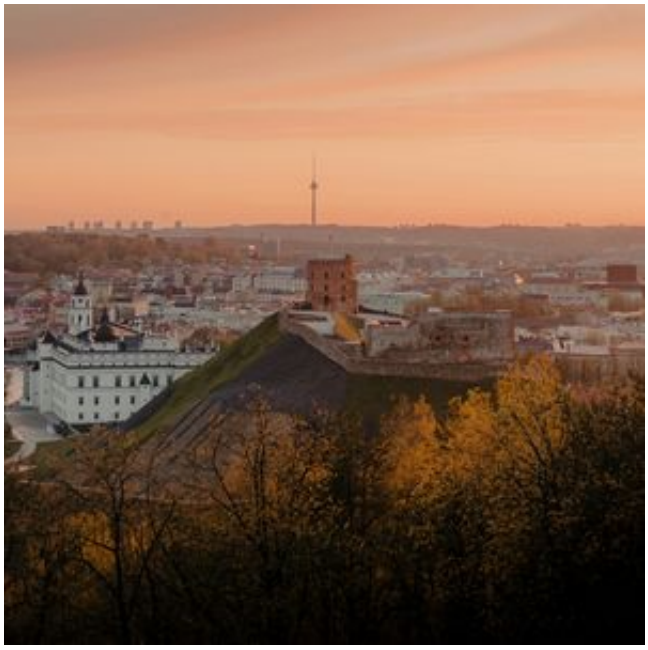
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Responsible MEPs



Jill Evans

Member



Ian Hudghton

Member



Heather Anderson

Member

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