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News | 22.01.2010

e-fa News Round-Up January 2010

News bulletin from the European Free Alliance Group

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 joint European parliamentary group with the Greens, making up the fourth largest group in parliament.

EFA MEPs are

Jill Evans MEP - Plaid Cymru The Party of Wales (EFA Group President)

Ian Hudghton MEP - Scottish National Party (Vice-President)

Frieda Brepoels MEP - Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie (Vice-President)

François Alfonsi - Partitu di a Nazione Corsa

Oriol Junqueras MEP - Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya

Alyn Smith MEP - Scottish National Party

Tatjana Zdanoka MEP - For Human Rights in a United Latvia

This week in Strasbourg: 18 - 21 January

EFA MEPs have been in Strasbourg this week for a plenary session of the European Parliament. Subjects on the agenda included the hearings for the new EU Commissioners, election of a new European Ombudsman and the situation in Iraq as well as democratisation in Turkey.

New EU Commission

Debate surrounding the new European Commission dominated the week's business in the European Parliament. MEPs had hoped to conclude the necessary hearings this week, but following the last minute withdrawal of controversial Bulgarian nominee Rumiana Jeleva, this process will take even longer than anticipated. It's likely that MEPs will be asked to approve the new European Commission during the February Strasbourg session.

SNP MEPs Ian Hudghton and Alyn Smith, members of the Fisheries and the Agriculture Committees respectively, have already invited the Commission nominees for these posts to visit Scotland if they are confirmed in the jobs and see for themselves the issues facing Scotland's agriculture and fisheries.

EU Ombudsman

MEPs voted in favour of re-electing current EU Ombudsman Nikiforos Diamandouros at a vote in Parliament on Wednesday. The EU Ombudsman is responsible for investigating complaints of maladministration in the EU institutions. Mr Diamandouros is a Greek national who has held the post since 2003. Widely seen as independent minded and effective, his re-election was welcomed by EFA MEPs.

Situation in Iraq

EFA President and Plaid MEP Jill Evans took part in Tuesday evening's debate on the situation in Iraq with new EU Foreign Policy chief Baroness Ashton. MEPs discussed the EU's role in reconstruction and human rights issues in Iraq, particularly in the context of the EU-Iraq Partnership and Co-operation agreement.

During the debate Jill reminded MEPs of the illegal nature of the war: *"The debate tonight is taking place against the backdrop of the Chilcot Inquiry in the UK into the illegal war on Iraq and what lessons should be learned. A lot of information is coming to light which confirms what many of us believed at the time of the invasion - that the reason for the war was regime change and control of resources - not the threat of weapons of mass destruction."*

Jill raised concerns about human rights violations in Iraq, particularly the use of the death penalty, and the lack of legislation to protect minorities. She added: *"There is still no legislation to protect minorities in Iraq and there is a continuing major refugee problem. Trades unionists, journalists, women politicians and human rights activists have disappeared or been killed. Suicide attacks continue to kill and injure."*

Democracy in Turkey

The N-VA's Frieda Brepoels spoke in the debate on Wednesday evening on the democratisation process in Turkey. The debate, in the presence of Commissioner Olli Rehn, follows the recent banning of the pro-Kurdish DTP party (Democratic Social Party) by the Turkish Constitutional Court.

Speaking in the debate Frieda criticised the ban on the DTP which she said stifled freedom of expression. Brepoels was critical of the democratic deficit in Turkey, in particular the lack of constitutional reform and the role played by the army and police. She added: *"Every time one door opens in Turkey towards democratisation another is slammed shut."* She pressed Commissioner Rehn to agree a fixed timing with the Turkish government for them to bring forward democratic reforms in line with EU requirements.

Fascist Symbols Row

Esquerra MEP Oriol Junqueras wrote to Parliament President Jerzy Buzek calling for Francoist symbols to be removed from the European Parliament building in Brussels. The row follows the display of a copy of the Spanish Constitution adorned with Francoist imagery and the motto 'One, great and free'. The offending display can be found on the third floor of the Altiero Spinelli building at the European Parliament in Brussels and was a gift of the Spanish Parliament.

Junqueras said: *"The EU stands for the principles of freedom and democracy, so it's totally incoherent for the European Parliament to publicly display the symbols of an authoritarian regime such as that of Franco. Placing fascist symbols on display isn't just offensive for those visitors to the European Parliament who know of the atrocities committed by this fascist dictatorship, it also harms the institution's image and provides cover for totalitarian regimes."*

EFA Conferences

EFA MEPs discussed the first of two major conferences to be held by the group in Brussels this year. The first - which will focus on linguistic diversity - will be held at the European Parliament in Brussels on Thursday 4 March. A wide range of expert speakers will be invited to take part, and the conference will be followed with a cultural event featuring performers from Catalonia, Galicia and the Basque Country.

Journalism Prize

EFA MEPs objected to the European Parliament's decision to restrict its annual journalism prize once more to entries in the official EU languages. The annual award goes to journalists who have shown excellence in covering EU issues, and four prizes of €5,000 each are awarded in the written press, TV, radio and internet categories. MEPs felt that this restriction would exclude the many examples of European related journalism produced in European languages such as Catalan, Welsh, Basque and others. See also www.eppj.eu

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Responsible MEPs



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Member



Ian Hudghton

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Heather Anderson

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