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News | 22.11.2011

e-fa: News Round-Up November 2011

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

November 2011 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 - U Partitu di a Nazione Corsa - Europe Ecologie
Oriol Junqueras MEP - Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya
Alyn Smith MEP - Scottish National Party
Tatjana Ždanoka MEP - For Human Rights in a United Latvia

Key issues this month include:

- EFA Conference: From Nations to Member States
- Spanish Elections
- Diabetes prevention
- 'Plan Bee'
- Palestinian prisoners
- Calls for electronic sheep tagging review
- Cluster Munitions
- Tackling illegal fishing
- EU Russia Forum
- Euro-regions

EFA Conference: From Nations to Member States

A well-attended conference organised by the EFA Group in Brussels in early November heard that emerging nations like Catalonia, Flanders, Scotland and Wales represent an important next step in the constitutional development of the European Union.

There is also an ever strengthening role for Europe's regions within the European Union, with constitutional regions across Europe gaining more and more powers and influence, at the expense of existing member states.

Delegates heard from various keynote political and academic speakers. Flemish nationalist leader Bart De Wever - whose party N-VA after the elections of June 2010 became the largest in Flanders and Belgium - told the conference that the traditional role of the state is diminishing, this is also true for Belgium.

His party he said believed in 'evolution not revolution' and was staunchly pro-European. Other keynote speakers were Rafael Larreina of Eusko Alkartasuna and Marta Rovira, Secretary General of Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya.

Academic contributions came from Prof. Lieven Tack of the College of Europe and Alfonso Gonzalez of the University of Tarragona. Academics pointed to the significantly enhanced role of Europe's regions, which now have substantial political and economic influence both locally and at European level. This was another major factor in weakening the influence and relevance of some of Europe's larger current member states. Dr Alan Sandry, a lecturer in social and political theory at UWIC, Wales, talked about the revival of nations in a time of economic turbulence, linking the re-emergence of nations to economic recovery.

The conference was introduced by European Parliament Vice President László Tökés, himself a former member of the EFA Group with an opening speech from EFA Group President Jill Evans. The event also featured a session on the role of multi-level governance, chaired by EFA MEPs Tatjana Ždanoka and François Alfonsi.

Watch a video clip from the conference at From Nations to Member States

Spanish Elections

EFA parties performed well at the Spanish state elections of 20 November. In what was a challenging election for progressive, left of centre parties, Esquerra Republicana - under the leadership of MEP **Oriol Junqueras** - retained their three seats in Madrid, and the Galician nationalists of BNG kept both of their MPs.

A significant development was the substantial support received by the left wing pro-independence coalition Amaiur in the Basque Country which includes EFA member Eusko Alkartasuna. They will have seven seats in the Cortes, whilst EFA also gains a member in Aragon in coalition with the United Left.

Spain now has a new right wing government with the Partido Popular ousting the Socialists who've governed since 2004. The PP will have an overall majority with a total of 186 seats to the Socialist party's 110.

Diabetes prevention

November 14 was World Diabetes Day and an exhibition at the European Parliament in Strasbourg sought to bring attention to this growing problem.

Flemish MEP **Frieda Brepoels** visited the exhibition and participated in a debate on the topic. She was impressed by the testimony of five young people.

Frieda commented: "The number of people suffering from diabetes is going up every year. Today it's estimated that almost 10% of the population have diabetes. What's alarming is that many people don't know they've got diabetes and this can lead to serious complications. That's why prevention remains hugely important."

'Plan Bee'

A resolution supported by EFA MEPs **Jill Evans** (Wales) and **Alyn Smith** (Scotland) calling for EU level action to tackle the serious problem of declining bee numbers in Europe was discussed in Strasbourg. Bees play an important role in ensuring the environmental sustainability of many plant species through pollination. Although the parliament supported calls for more research and co-ordinated action into the problem, there were concerns that this would not go far enough.

SNP MEP Alyn Smith described the vote as a "missed opportunity" to examine the importance of sustainable agricultural systems, and which did not adequately reflect the threats to bees which exist today. Bees pollinate 90% of the world's commercial plants, including most fruits, vegetables and nuts.

Alyn commented: "Bees thrive in diverse ecosystems, and the agricultural model we have today - chemical intensive monocultures - will not encourage bee populations. We should be looking at diversifying and making more sustainable agricultural production, such as through crop rotation: buffer strips are not enough on their own."

Palestinian prisoners

On 11 October more that a thousand Palestinian prisoners were set free in exchange for the Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit. Whilst this development is a positive display of trust between Israelis and Palestinians, the conflict is still far from over.

This was clear from a seminar held at the European Parliament in which N-VA MEP Frieda Brepoels took part. The participants heard from representatives of the Palestinians still held in Israeli jails and from the Palestinian authority. Well over four thousand Palestinians remain locked up in Israel, amongst them scores of children.

Calls for electronic sheep tagging review

EFA MEPs **Jill Evans** (Wales) and **Alyn Smith** (Scotland) secured a commitment from European Health Commissioner John Dalli to consider reviewing the controversial EU scheme for electronic sheep tagging or EID. Jill and Alyn met the Commissioner in Strasbourg as part of a cross party delegation to discuss farmers' concerns on a range of issues, proposed by Jill.

After the meeting Jill commented: "Welsh farmers have made every effort, and invested millions of pounds, to comply with this EU legislation, but the fact is that it will always be impossible to tag and account for every single sheep in a flock, especially when they are farmed up in hills and mountains. Sheep will get lost. Added to this is the fact that the technology available is not yet able to deliver a 100% reliable result. I am pleased that Commissioner Dalli told us that he will consider a review of the legislation to identify the problems.

Alyn said: "I think we've a good chance of making progress. We had 14 MEPs, from different political groups and different countries, laying out the concerns we have regarding readability of technology,

proportionate cross compliance penalties, sheep welfare concerns, the danger of tag loss and the need to postpone the date on which all old sheep should be tagged. This reinforced the message that the Parliament still has its concerns on EID and it should strengthen the Commissioner's hand for reform."

Cluster Munitions

MEPs including the N-VA's **Frieda Brepoels** stepped up efforts for a total ban on cluster munitions. The European Parliament supported a resolution calling for a worldwide ban on cluster bombs.

This type of weapon kills indiscriminately and with huge force. It's estimated that children make up a third of the victims of this weapon, and that 60% of all victims are civilians. A UN cluster munitions treaty came into force in August 2010 committing signatories to a ban on the development, use or production of cluster munitions. So far 111 countries have signed up, but not the world's largest users of the product, including the US, China and Russia, as well as five EU member states.

Tackling illegal fishing

Globally it's estimated that one in every five fish taken from the sea is a victim of illegal fishing. MEPs meeting in Strasbourg considered a report from a Swedish Green MEP with proposals for tackling this serious issue.

SNP MEP and leading European Parliament Fisheries Committee member **Ian Hudghton** spoke in the debate in parliament.

Ian said: "The report says that the EU, at least on paper, has armed itself with tools to combat illegal fishing, but we have to do more than that to persuade other regimes and other states. We have to be above reproach, and it further calls on the review of the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) to be used to create incentives for legal fishing. This is very important. Incentives are absolutely crucial to successful fisheries management policy, and the current CFP has singularly failed to provide them."

The SNP MEP criticised the failure of the CFP to tackle this and other issues, praising the constructive role played by the Scottish government in promoting a viable fishing industry. Ian added: "The conservation credit scheme that is operating in Scotland has government, industry and environmental NGOs all working together to devise and implement successful management measures which, among other things, are radically reducing the wastage of discards. In my view, a CFP which threatens equal access to waters and resources will not help to encourage such initiatives, nor will it provide the necessary incentives to report illegal activity."

See Ian speak in the debate at Debate on illegal fishing

EU Russia Forum

EFA MEP **Tatjana Ždanoka** addressed the EU Russia Forum which took place in Brussels in November. Tatjana is a strong campaigner for the rights of Russian speakers in Latvia and across the EU. Russian speakers make up more than a third of the population of Latvia and it's estimated that there may be as many as eight million Russian speakers across Western Europe.

The Fifth European Russia Forum was initiated by the European Russian-speakers Alliance as a venue for non-governmental dialogue between Russia and the European Union. The event was organised in partnership with the Greens/EFA group in the European Parliament and the “Russkiy Mir” Foundation.

The Forum discussed the geopolitical relationship between the EU and Russia as well as ideas for better

supporting integration in society. Participants also highlighted the need to tackle right wing extremism and xenophobia. The meeting comes ahead of an EU- Russia summit and its conclusions have been forwarded to the EU Commission and the Russian government.

Euro-regions

On Friday 18 November, N-VA MEP **Frieda Brepoels** spoke at a Maas-Rhine Euro-region conference, held to mark 35 years of Euro-regions and 20 years of the EU's Interreg programme which promotes inter-regional co-operation. The theme of the conference was EU 2020 and cohesion policy after 2013.

In her speech, Frieda, a member of the European Parliament's Transport and Tourism Committee focussed on the European perspective on the flagship policy of "New skills and new jobs". She emphasised that the EU 2020 agenda has little chance of success unless the EU member states undertake the necessary structural reforms.

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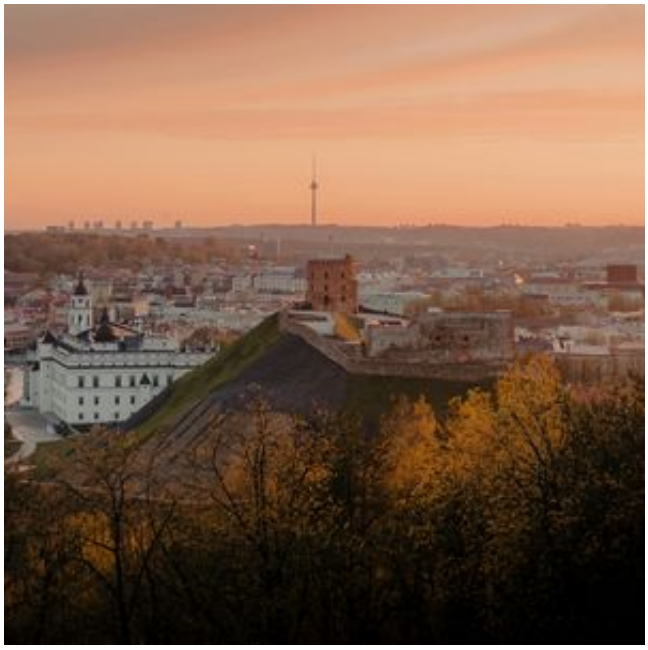
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