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e-fa: News Round-Up October 2011

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

October 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 include:

- **EFA Conference - From Nations to Member States**
- **EU Ombudsman**
- **Basque peace process**
- **SNP Annual Conference, Inverness**
- **Non-citizens**
- **Simplifying public procurement**
- **Syria and Bahrain - human rights concerns**
- **CAP reform proposals**
- **Battery Recycling**
- **Nobel peace prize**

EFA Conference - From Nations to Member States

The EFA Group will hold a conference at the European Parliament on Wednesday 9 November entitled 'From Nations to Member States' looking at current constitutional developments and aspirations across the EU. Key themes include:

- 'Re-thinking Europe': The revival of nations in a context of economic turbulences'. What are the threats and opportunities for stateless nations in the current economic and political crisis?
- 'The Emerging Member States'. How do representatives from Scotland, Flanders, Catalonia and the Basque Country see their future as nations? Will they become the next Member States of the European Union?
- 'Towards a multi-level governance'. In which way can and should the EU treat stateless nations, peoples and regions in Europe? How can they be involved in EU decision-making?

For more information visit www.greens-efa.eu/from-nations-to-member-states-4536.html

EU Ombudsman

The European Parliament held a debate to review the work of the European Ombudsman during October's Strasbourg plenary session. The office of the EU Ombudsman deals with complaints about maladministration in the EU institutions, many related to transparency and access to documents.

Mr Nikiforos Diamandouros of Greece has held the post of EU Ombudsman since 2003 and during that time his office has dealt with more than 36,000 complaints. The post was established by the Maastricht treaty and the Ombudsman is elected by the European Parliament.

Speaking in the debate, EFA MEP and member of the Parliament's Civil Liberties committee, **Tatjana Ždanoka** congratulated Mr Diamandouros on his work and highlighted three key areas for development.

Tatjana said: "Firstly. In 2010 most of complaints to the Ombudsman referred to the lack of transparency in the EU administration. I want to urge the Council and the Commission to use secrecy as an exception rather than a rule. Very often after reading documents in the so called "secret room" of the European Parliament as a member of the Civil Liberties Committee I ask myself the question "WHERE is the need for confidentiality of one or another document?"

"Second. We also know that the majority of inquiries in 2010 concerned the European Commission. We share completely the Ombudsman's concerns about the high number of unsatisfactory replies by the Commission to his critical remarks.

"Third. EU citizens must be better informed about the competencies and responsibilities of the European Ombudsman, national ombudsmen and the Committee on Petitions. Only then can the number of inadmissible petitions can be reduced."

Hope for Basque peace process

EFA MEPs welcomed a new international initiative to end the armed conflict in the Basque Country. Many EFA MEPs have been active in the European Parliament's cross party support group for the Basque country, and have worked to persuade the EU to take a more active role.

Last year, Frieda Brepoels hosted a press conference in Brussels where South African Human Rights lawyer Brian Currin launched an appeal for a ceasefire. This bore fruit a year and a half later at a conference hosted in Donostia/San Sebastian where a number of senior figures appealed for an end to violence. ETA responded with a declaration of a definitive end to armed activity.

Now EFA MEPs have called upon the EU to actively support the peace process in the Basque country as they did in Northern Ireland.

Responding to recent developments SNP MEP **Alyn Smith** said: *"The Basque conflict is the EU's last remaining armed conflict, and it is a long story of heartbreak with no winners, only losers, not least democracy. Recent developments show real promise to take the gun and the bomb out of Basque politics for good. It is clear the peace process needs considerably more international help and support to see it to a peaceful conclusion. The momentum that this process has gained has been remarkable, but to proceed to the next stage we as outsiders can help to break down some of the barriers of mistrust that still exist."*

Plaid Cymru MEP **Jill Evans** said: *"This is a unique opportunity to build a lasting and sustainable peace and end a decades long armed conflict. I urge all of those concerned to seize this unique chance for peace. In particular, it is now time for the European Union to play a far more active role in supporting the peace process, as it did with success in Northern Ireland. There is still a very long way to go, but this declaration is a very important step on the path to peace."*

The European Parliament's Basque Friendship Group held a press conference during the October Strasbourg session to further call on the EU to take an active role.

Speaking at the press conference **Frieda Brepoels** (N-VA) said: *"As far back as the 1970s senior figures from my party travelled to the Basque country to support peace and democracy. Many of us today including myself have tried to continue that tradition with support for the Gernika accord, and last year Brian Currin's call for a ceasefire. Now the EU must take up its responsibilities in helping build a lasting peace."*

MEP **François Alfonsi** (Corsica) said: *"Taking note of this Parliament's own resolution on the Basque peace process from 2006, we call upon the European Commission and Council to play an active role in the Basque peace process as they did in Northern Ireland."*

SNP Annual Conference, Inverness

The SNP celebrated its 77th annual conference at Inverness as Scotland's largest party, having won an absolute majority of seats at this year's Scottish Parliament elections. The party is now committed to holding a referendum on Scottish independence during this parliamentary term.

The conference also took time to recognise the contribution of such senior Scottish nationalists as Winnie Ewing, Allan Macartney and Neil MacCormick to the development of EFA during this its 30th anniversary year. Delegates passed a resolution proposed by SNP President **Ian Hudghton** which noted EFA's 'longstanding campaign for the creation of a Europe of Peoples based on respect for diversity and identity, decentralisation and Independence for Europe's stateless nations.'

On the conference fringe, a meeting sponsored by the EFA party attracted a large number of delegates to

hear N-VA party leader Bart de Wever talk about nation building and the situation in Flanders and Belgium.

Non-citizens

Tatjana Ždanoka continued her campaign to win voting rights for Latvia's so-called non-citizens at the Strasbourg October plenary. These people are mostly permanent residents of Latvia, often Russian speakers, who found themselves in limbo following the end of the Soviet Union.

They have limited political and other rights even though many of them have lived their whole lives in Latvia.

Objecting to the decision not to allow an oral question on this issue, Tatjana explained the issue to fellow MEPs.

Speaking in plenary, Tatjana said: *"Precisely 20 years have passed since the Supreme Council of Latvia adopted the resolution by which citizenship of Latvia was awarded only to those residents who were citizens on 17 June 1940 and their descendants. One third of the population of Latvia were deprived of all political rights. This was a unique case in parliamentary history: a parliament deprived an essential part of its own voters of citizenship and, thus, voting rights."*

"I want to pose a question: Whether the situation is fair and democratic when any EU national coming to Latvia has a right to vote in local and European elections, but at the same time an essential part of country's natives and those who have lived in Latvia for decades are deprived of this right?"

"I regret that the proposal to include an oral question on voting rights for non-citizens of Latvia in local elections did not receive support. I do hope that this issue will be debated in the near future."

Simplifying public procurement

Plaid MEP **Jill Evans** welcomed calls by the European Parliament to simplify rules on public procurement to make it easier for small and medium sized businesses to win public sector contracts. MEPs voted in Strasbourg ahead of an EU law due in December to revise public procurement rules. Smaller businesses tend to win a proportionately smaller share of public contracts than their economic share suggests they should, so MEPs want the rules to be changed.

In Wales alone more than £4 billion is spent by the public sector every year so there is great potential for economic and social benefit if the system is simplified.

Speaking after the vote, Jill said: *"Many small businesses are struggling in this very tough economic climate. Making it easier for them to compete for public sector contracts would be a major boost, and help protect jobs in local communities."*

"The bidding process for public sector work can often be dauntingly complicated and costly and this puts smaller firms at a disadvantage from the start. Bids for contracts should be judged on economic, social and environmental criteria rather than just looking for the cheapest deal. European procurement laws will be revised at the end of this year. We've made it very clear that they need to be simplified. Adopting an electronic tendering and application process could make things easier and more transparent. Whole lifecycle costs should also be taken into account. The system we have now puts smaller firms at a disadvantage and this has to change."

Syria and Bahrain - human rights concerns

Human rights concerns in the Middle East amidst ongoing unrest and upheaval were a major concern for MEPs this month. The N-VA's **Frieda Brepoels** raised the issue of secret detentions in Syria, specifically the case of the renowned psychoanalyst Mrs Rafah Nashed, who has been detained since being seized at Damascus airport on 10 September.

Brepoels joined other MEPs from all political groups to condemn the arbitrary arrest and detention of Ms Nashed.

MEPs were also highly critical of the violent response of Bahraini authorities to pro-democracy demonstrations there, condemning widespread detentions of political opponents.

In a resolution co-signed by Frieda Brepoels and **Alyn Smith**, MEPs condemned 'the repression of citizens in Bahrain which led to dozens of deaths and injuries' and urged 'the immediate and unconditional release of all peaceful demonstrators'.

CAP reform proposals revealed

Formal proposals to reform the EU Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) were published in October and welcomed as a solid start to the negotiating process by SNP MEP **Alyn Smith**. The European Commission has indicated that it wants to make the CAP more competitive and greener, with an emphasis on food quality and a fairer distribution of funding.

Alyn said: "On balance, I like the tone of the proposals in their aim, but am nervous that for every lofty ambition there will need to be a complicated and expensive paper-chase to create a scheme that works. We risk replacing an already admin-heavy CAP with an even more burdensome paper-chase. On greening, I see little to dislike. 7% set aside is a way of actually rewarding existing practice of putting unproductive scraps of land to ecological purposes. I've yet to see a farm that is 100% productive, so opposition from some to this proposal seems to me to miss the point that it will reward current best practice and change little on the ground.

"I urge all organisations to get all over this. Scotland has only a few representatives in these negotiations and we will need all the support we can get. I'm confident that Scotland is at the mainstream of European agricultural thinking, and confident too that we can build allies for our goal of a profitable, productive and sustainable EU agricultural sector."

Plaid MEP **Jill Evans** was more cautious in her response. Jill is concerned that a study by the Welsh government has shown that more than a third of Welsh farms could face a drop in income if the proposals are adopted as they stand. It was a victory that Welsh lobbying efforts had paid off and direct payments to farmers will continue, despite efforts by the Westminster government to abolish them. She emphasised that lobbying had to continue to get the best deal for Wales.

Commenting, Jill said: *"It is very worrying that as things stand, over a third of Welsh farms could see a ten per cent drop in their income. Farmers in Wales are already struggling and this further attack on their livelihoods would inevitably lead to hardship. This wouldn't just hit the farmers themselves, but also our wider rural communities.*

"Whilst I'm pleased that essential payments to farmers will continue, the proposed changes could have very serious implications for Welsh farmers. The European Commission has proposed a transitional period of five years to introduce the new arrangements, but with as much as 40% of the payment calculated by new criteria in the first year. That's far too steep, far too quickly. I will be working with colleagues to ensure the change is more gradual."

Battery Recycling

For the sixth year in a row the European Parliament hosted an awareness campaign to highlight the importance of battery recycling. The N-VA's **Frieda Brepoels** presented a prize to one lucky winner who'd brought in batteries for recycling.

Nobel peace prize

The decision in October to award the Nobel Peace prize to three prominent women's rights activists was evidence of trust in the power of women according to N-VA MEP **Frieda Brepoels**. This year's prize was awarded to Liberian President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, fellow Liberian Leymah Gbowee (Women Peace and Security Network Africa) and Tawakkul Karman from Yemen (Women Journalists without Chains).

Frieda Brepoels said: *"The positive role that women play in establishing stability in internal or international conflicts is all too often ignored. Awarding the Nobel Prize to these three frontline champions for women's rights can therefore only be applauded."*

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Responsible MEPs



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Member



Ian Hudghton

Member



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