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PARLIAMENTARY HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE S&D GROUP IN THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT • December 2012

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NOBEL PEACE PRIZE PASSED TO EUROPEAN CITIZENS

A peace prize made possible by the people has now been passed on to the people. The EU won the 2012 Nobel Peace Prize, but the European Parliament believes this honour belongs to everyone. During a special ceremony in Strasbourg, the prize was symbolically handed over to citizens of different ages and nationalities to represent the people of Europe. "The reason we have peace is because of the EU," EP president Martin Schulz said, reminding that we should not take peace in Europe for granted.

NOBEL PEACE PRIZE WINNER CANNOT FAIL ON FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS

The House meeting in Strasbourg voiced strong concerns on a number of persisting fundamental rights violations across the EU, notably against minorities, migrants, media freedom and discrimination on the grounds of gender or sexual orientation. In its annual report on 'Human Rights in the EU', drafted by S&D MEP Monika Flašíková Beňová, the Parliament called on European governments and institutions to "prosecute xenophobia, racism, anti-gypsyism prejudice and other forms of violence and hatred against any minority groups, including hate speech", to lift "restrictions on access to sexual and reproductive health services" and "to bring forward a proposal for the full mutual recognition of the effects of all civil status documents across the EU, including legal gender recognition, marriages and registered partnerships, in order to reduce discriminatory legal and administrative barriers for citizens who exercise their right to free movement." The report, adopted by a large left-wing majority led by the S&D Group, was opposed by the EPP and the conservatives, who tried and failed to water down it by deleting a large number of its chapters. The conservatives even tabled an alternative resolution to plenary which was heavily defeated.

PARLIAMENT APPROVES EU PATENT RULES

EU inventors will soon be able to get a unitary patent at last. After over 30 years of talks, a new regime will cut the cost of an EU patent by up to 80%, making it more competitive compared to the US and Japan. The Parliament finally gave its green light to a long-awaited new regulation, drafted by S&D Group vice-president Bernhard Rapkay, on establishing an EU patent system.

The new provisions – expected to enter into force by 2014 at the latest – will allow inventors to introduce a single patent application to protect their creations across 25 EU member states (Italy and Spain have not opted in), saving on bureaucratic and translation costs. Currently, getting a patent protected in each of the EU countries costs on average €32,000, while with the new EU system the expected costs will be less than €1,000 – compared to the €1,800 it costs in the US.

"Today's vote is good news for the European economy and especially for SMEs. The new EU patent will boost innovation and bring them relief in a time of economic crisis" said Bernhard Rapkay

"Intellectual property must not stop at borders. The path towards the introduction of the EU patent has been long and troubled, but ultimately it has been worth the effort," Rapkay concluded.

GREEN LIGHT FOR 2012 & 2013 BUDGET PACKAGE DEAL

Six billion Euros to pay bills in 2012, priority for growth and jobs in next year's budget and a strategy for dealing with payment shortfalls in 2013 – these are the main parts of the budget package formally adopted by Parliament this week. S&D Group vice-president Göran Färm told the media:

"Europe has a budget for next year. The compromise was necessary. We have managed to avoid a budgetary crisis on top of the economic crisis. We need a budget to promote growth and deliver on our promises. The pact for growth and jobs, agreed by the Council before the summer, must not be empty promises without substance. That is why we expect EU governments to respect their commitments and pay all the bills due in 2012 without undermining an already very tight budget for next year."

The package now formally endorsed by the EP includes a budget for 2013 worth €132.8 billion in payments and €150.9 billion in commitments. This budget amounts to 0.99% of the EU's gross national income (GNI) in payments and 1.13% of EU GNI in commitments. This is less than the 2012 budget, for which the percentages are 1.05% and 1.15% respectively. The amending budget for 2012 was adopted by 514 votes to 68, with 82 abstentions

FURTHER LIBERALISATION OF AIRPORT GROUND HANDLING RULES REJECTED

In Strasbourg, the Parliament overwhelmingly rejected further liberalisation of ground handling services at European airports. The S&D Group has been defending the rights of airport workers, which were at risk under the Commission's proposal to raise the minimum number of ground handling providers from two to three for airports with more than 5 million passengers per year. The Socialists and Democrats are pleased to have succeeded in stopping the Commission's proposal. Now the EP's transport and employment committees will negotiate the regulation draft again and it will only return to the plenary when the S&Ds' requests have been included in the text.

IN SHORT

Financial Transaction Tax One Step Closer to Reality - European lawmakers gave its green light to allowing 11 member states* to introduce a financial transaction tax (FTT). "The financial transaction tax is one step closer to becoming a reality", said S&D Group leader Hannes Swoboda following the outcome of the vote.

"Over the last two years the Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament have taken the lead on pushing for this tax at an EU level. We are now ready and eager to work on a specific proposal from the European Commission. We urged the EU finances ministers to approve this enhanced cooperation as quickly as possible".

"The fact that only some member states will participate should not lead the Commission to water down its original proposal", warned S&D Euro MP and rapporteur for the European Parliament, Anni Podimata. "The tax should cover as many transactions as possible. An FTT should be seen as the financial markets' contribution to repairing the damage caused by the crisis. It will discourage the most speculative and risky transactions and bring the financial sector back to its original task, the financing of the real economy. With the revenues generated, the tax will help the countries involved to reduce their debts and deficits. At the same time, it will shift the burden from EU citizens to the financial sector", she concluded.

**The member states proceeding with the financial transaction tax are: Germany, France, Italy, Estonia, Spain, Greece, Slovakia, Belgium, Austria, Portugal and Slovenia.*

Parliament Stress in a Resolution that Israeli settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem are illegal under international law - Israel's plans to build 3 000 new settlement units in the West Bank and East Jerusalem would make a two-state solution impossible, MEPs warn in a resolution passed in Strasbourg. Members insist that direct peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians must resume and urge all parties to refrain from any action that could hinder peace efforts. The construction of the new settlements announced by the Israeli government on 2 December would make it impossible to create a viable, contiguous and sovereign Palestinian State as they would divide the West Bank, MEPs note. They stress that Israeli settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem are illegal under international law and must be stopped immediately. MEPs also say Israel must immediately release the USD 100 million in Palestinian tax revenues withheld, according to the Israeli finance minister, in order to pay Palestinian debts to the Israeli Electric Corporation. They encourage Israel and the Palestinian Authority to settle all outstanding financial disputes through EU mediation. Parliament condemns the statements

by Hamas' political leader Khaled Meshal rejecting the recognition of the State of Israel, calls on Hamas to recognise Israel's right to exist and calls again for Palestinian reconciliation.

EU Free Trade Agreement with Colombia & Peru -The Parliament gave its consent to a free trade agreement signed by the EU with Colombia and Peru, after years of intense negotiation. S&D president Hannes Swoboda welcomed the outcome of the vote and announced that an S&D delegation will visit Bogotá and Lima from 16-20 December. S&D spokesperson on international trade Euro MP Bernd Lange, said:

"With the new trade agreement we have gained a strong influence in both countries, which has already brought hope of further improvements for the whole of the society through economic growth and better human, labour and environmental standards. In order to use the trade agreement as a tool to achieve improvements – particularly for trade unionists in Colombia – the S&D Group successfully put forward a resolution requesting that the two governments develop transparent and binding roadmaps on human, labour and environmental standards before any trade agreement would enter into force. I am sure this agreement will bring economic progress to Colombia and Peru, but also to Europe, and it will also bring us closer in our common defence of human and labour rights."

E-Commerce in Europe - Consumers are increasingly shopping online, but e-commerce in Europe is far from reaching its full potential. Rules on VAT and consumer protection differ between member states and there is still a lack of trust in payment and delivery systems. A report adopted by MEPs in Strasbourg sets out what can be done to overcome these problems and complete the digital market in the EU.

EU-Russia Partnership - Russia can become a strategic partner to the EU only if it shares and upholds EU democratic principles and values, said MEPs in a resolution voted in Strasbourg. EU-Russia relations are still suffering from Russia's failure to embrace democratic values fully and strengthen the rule of law. Yet talks on a comprehensive new EU-Russia pact must continue, despite Russia's lack of enthusiasm for them, adds the text.

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