

## Press release – President David Sassoli to visit Skopje: “Remain on the European track”



On his first external visit, the President of the European Parliament, David Sassoli, will travel to North Macedonia. The visit to Skopje will take place next Monday and Tuesday, November 4-5. A trip to Tirana, Albania is scheduled for December 2-3.

Ahead of the visit to Skopje, President Sassoli stated:

“Visiting North Macedonia, and very soon after Albania, is of highest importance to me personally at this moment. We know that the population in both countries has been deeply disappointed by the Council’s failure to agree on the opening of accession talks due to the veto of a few member states. We understand and share this disappointment. Albania and North Macedonia have delivered on the reforms we asked from them and now deserve to be rewarded for their extraordinary efforts. All the more so, I want to call on the citizens and especially on the young generation: Do not give up hope, please remain on the European track. The European Parliament stands with you.

With a strong majority of votes, the European Parliament has reiterated its full support for the opening of membership negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania one week ago. We will not remain silent but urge EU states to take a decision unanimously in favour of accession talks at the next meeting.

In the meantime, we encourage both countries to continue on their reform paths. We are convinced that, despite the postponement, this time is not wasted. The reforms carried out on the way to full EU membership are in the best interests of the countries and their citizens, and will first and foremost benefit the young generation that deserves a better future”.

*During his visit in Skopje, President Sassoli will meet the Prime Minister of North Macedonia, Mr. Zoran Zaev, as well as President Stevo Pendarovski. He will also hold talks with the leaders of parliamentary political parties, the President of the Assembly of North Macedonia, Talat Xhaferi, and address the Parliament. At the start of his visit, he will open the Europe House at the Delegation of the EU to the Republic of North Macedonia and join a discussion with students.*

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## [Australian Capital Territory legalises personal cannabis growing and consumption](#)

On 25 September 2019, the Legislative Assembly of the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) approved [a law permitting personal cultivation, possession and use of cannabis for recreational purposes](#). The background note to the act describes the objective as a 'harm minimisation approach', stating that 'the outright prohibition model of drug policy is not working'.

The Drugs of Dependence (Personal Use) Amendment Act 2019 enters into force on 31 January 2020. It will exempt people over 18 years old from penalties for cultivation of up to two cannabis plants per person (maximum four plants per household), kept in part of the home not generally accessible by the public, and for possession of up to 50 grams of dried cannabis herb or 150 grams of 'fresh' cannabis. This replaces the 'Simple Cannabis Offence Notice' (monetary fine) currently given to adults found in possession of small quantities of cannabis for personal use, but maintains existing therapeutic and non-therapeutic diversionary schemes for minors.

Under the new law, sale or possession of cannabis seeds remains illegal. The drug should not be used knowingly near children or in a public place. No sales outlets are foreseen, and even sharing a small amount will be considered a cannabis supply offence. Cannabis tourism therefore seems unlikely.

In a parallel with the United States, this puts state-level criminal law in direct conflict with federal criminal law, which provides for a penalty of up to two years' imprisonment for possession. However, in Australia the Commonwealth (federal) Criminal Code provides an exception to Commonwealth offences, where conduct is justified or excused under the law of a State or Territory. It is not yet clear whether that exemption may apply in this case. ACT Policing may arrest for breach of Territory or Commonwealth laws, with an offence to be then tried in a Territory court or a Commonwealth court respectively, but it is unclear how this may be decided.

The ACT houses the federal capital city of Canberra, and has a population of

just under 400 000 in approximately 2 358 square kilometres.

## Article – How it works: Parliament's plenary sessions



The 751 MEPs elected to the European Parliament meet 12 times a year in plenary sessions in Strasbourg, with additional sessions in Brussels.

Plenary is a complicated undertaking, with debates and votes in the EU's 24 official languages on a wide variety of topics, from trade agreements and the EU budget to votes on EU laws and debates on topical issues.

### **Debates**

The plenary agenda is decided by the [Conference of Presidents](#), made up of the Parliament's President and the leaders of the political groups. Parliament constantly responds to what is happening beyond its doors, so the agenda changes to allow MEPs to discuss issues of importance to the people who elected them.

For example, MEPs agreed to add debates on the danger of violent right-wing extremism in the wake of the terrorist attack in Germany's Halle, the Turkish military operation in northern Syria and the impact of the Thomas Cook bankruptcy to [October's plenary agenda](#).

Plenary sittings are chaired by the President or one of the 14 vice-



presidents.

Speaking time is divided among the [political groups](#) depending on the size of the group. The size of the group also determines the order in which they speak. The so-called catch-the-eye procedure allows MEPs who have not been allocated time by a group the chance to have their say via short, one-minute speeches.

Members can also raise a blue card during debates in order to ask the MEP speaking a question. The speaker may refuse to accept a question.

### **Voting**

The President or vice-presidents also preside over the voting, which can be fast-paced, as MEPs might have to vote on hundreds of amendments if the legislation is complicated. For example, there are often lots of amendments to the budget. Voting usually takes place at midday after the morning's debates.

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## **[Article – Traineeship at the European Parliament: apply by 30 November](#)**



The [Parliament](#) is an important forum for political debate and decision-making at the EU level. MEPs are [directly elected](#) by voters in all EU countries to represent their interests and to make sure other EU institutions are working democratically.

To provide opportunities for vocational training and an insight into its work, Parliament has a traineeship programme allowing university graduates aged 18 and over to get a taster of a career with the EU.

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## [Article – Electing the next EU Ombudsman](#)



At the start of each new parliamentary term, MEPs elect an Ombudsman for a five-year term.

The [five candidates](#) in the running were announced during the October plenary session. They are in alphabetical order:

- **Giuseppe Fortunato**, current ombudsman of Italy's Campania region
- **Julia Laffranque**, an Estonian judge at the European Court for Human Rights in Strasbourg

- Latvia's **Nils Muižnieks**, former Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights
- Current EU Ombudsman and former Irish journalist [Emily O'Reilly](#)
- Former Swedish MEP **Cecilia Wikström**

## **Election**

To qualify for nomination, each candidate had to show they had the [experience needed](#) and required the backing of at least 40 MEPs from a minimum of two EU countries.

There will be a [public hearing](#) by the Parliament's [petitions committee](#) on 3 December, when the candidates will present their priorities.

The Parliament is expected to elect the Ombudsman by secret ballot during December's plenary session in Strasbourg.

## **About the EU Ombudsman**

The European Ombudsman investigates complaints from citizens, EU residents and EU-based [organisations](#) about poor administration by EU institutions or other EU bodies, such as unfair conduct, discrimination, unnecessary delays or incorrect procedures.

The ombudsman's office can also launch investigations on its own initiative. It reports back to the European Parliament each year.