

## Women in 2019: the game changers

FT Magazine **Life & Arts**

### Prosecutor Laura Codruța Kövesi: 'If you do what is good, no defeat is definitive'

After tackling corruption in Romania, her next challenge is fighting fraud across the EU



Laura Codruța Kövesi 13 HOURS AGO

---

Thirty years ago, I was a teenager playing basketball in a small town in Romania. We used to dream of winning the national championship — and then we won the national championship. Then, I dreamed of playing in the national team of Romania, and I did.

Sometimes we won, other times we lost, but we played and fought with our hearts and souls. I loved the sport, the competition, the fair play and the teamwork, the tenacity necessary to achieve a dream.

At that time, my dreams were all about sport. But things changed when I attended law school and became a prosecutor. Now I am 46 years old and for more than half of my life I have been a prosecutor. When I was initially appointed, in 1995, men dominated the judiciary. One of the first things I heard when I started working was that “the prosecutor’s office is not for women”.

But I was not one for being discouraged or giving up. My years playing sport had taught me that work, courage and the continuous search for excellence could surpass any prejudice. At 33, I became the general prosecutor of Romania.

Not only was I very young, but I was also the first woman to hold this position. My family and friends were truly scared; at that time in Romania, it seemed impossible for a general prosecutor not to be dismissed before the end of their mandated term. Yet to everyone's surprise, I managed to complete not one but two terms.

In 2013, I became the chief prosecutor of Romania's National Anti-Corruption Directorate (DNA), a specialised structure for combating high-level corruption.

The DNA conducted investigations into thousands of officials, among them ministers and former ministers, deputies, senators, state secretaries, presidents of county councils and other civil servants — people who, at first glance, seemed untouchable — regardless of their positions or wealth.



Laura Codruța Kövesi in Bucharest, Romania, in February: 'We proved that Romanian institutions can work efficiently and legally'

Our investigations contributed to raised awareness of the seriousness of corruption in Romania. When politicians tried to change the legislation in order to affect the fight against corruption, hundreds of thousands of Romanians protested in the streets to show their support for this battle and for the rule of law.

More importantly, we proved that Romanian institutions can work efficiently and legally. But above all, we showed that corruption can be defeated.

However, there was plenty of resistance. An entire system, formed of politicians and businessmen

There were repeated attempts to limit the efficacy of our investigations, to restrict the tools used by prosecutors and to deny the waiving of immunity for politicians charged with corruption offences.

## **We conducted investigations into officials and ministers who seemed untouchable**

For example, in January 2017 the government tried to adopt an emergency ordinance to decriminalise some offences, in order to favour people who were charged with abuse of office and to pardon them.

The entire justice system faced unbelievable attacks, ranging from defamatory misinformation to hiring foreign companies specialising in intimidation and harassment. In July 2018, following pressure by politicians, the minister of justice at that time decided to end my term, despite the opposition of the president of the country.

---

**Last month I began** a new chapter. I became the first chief prosecutor of the [European Public Prosecutor's Office](#), a new body in Luxembourg that will probe alleged fraud of EU funds.

It will require a great effort from everyone involved to set up a thriving institution that is trusted by European citizens, able to protect the financial interests of the EU and to contribute to the enforcement of European law.

It's been a long time since I played basketball in a small town in Romania. So many things have changed but, on the other hand, nothing essential truly has. If you do what you know is good, moral, legal, if you have a fair and noble purpose, no defeat is definitive.

In the past few years, I have felt more and more what I used to feel when I played basketball, that I had a titanic support team. In this case, it's the millions of citizens who gave meaning to our fight for justice and truth.

This has been my story so far. For me, this is where a new story, the one of the European team, begins.

*Follow [@FTMag](#) on Twitter to find out about our latest stories first. Listen and subscribe to [Culture Call](#), a transatlantic conversation from the FT, at [ft.com/culture-call](https://www.ft.com/culture-call) or on [Apple Podcasts](#)*