

## International

# 'Great expectations', but EU's fraud prosecutor undaunted by challenge

## Kovesi named head of European Public Prosecutor's Office

**BUCHAREST:** Romanians regularly stop Laura Codruta Kovesi in the street to shake her hand or to be photographed with the woman who for five years led the country's fight against corruption. Her work as the head of Romania's DNA anti-corruption agency, which secured convictions of mayors, lawmakers and ministers, won Kovesi many admirers in her homeland and in the rest of the European Union.

It also earned the wrath of the centre-left government, and she was driven out of office in July last year. But government opposition to her candidacy was not enough to prevent Kovesi being confirmed this month as the EU's first fraud prosecutor. She starts the job next month, but warns against expecting immediate results from the new European Public Prosecutor's Office (EPP) she will lead in the battle against fraud and corruption affecting the EU budget.

"I think there will be very high expectations once the institution effectively starts working on cases," Kovesi, 46, told Reuters in an interview. "But I think people must understand that credible results will come in two, three years, once final verdicts from courts start

coming in." Romania's government has come under fire in the EU over changes to judicial legislation and staffing that have undermined the rule of law and weakened the fight against entrenched corruption.

But Kovesi, who is likely to start in her new role on Nov 4, makes clear she will not be daunted by pressure from anyone. "There will certainly be pressure - once investigations start - on the institution and prosecutors, let's not forget that the people using European funds are generally businessmen, some of whom are very powerful," Kovesi said. "But I am extremely well trained for it, I am not even a little bit worried about that."

### Multi-billion-euro budget

The EU is working on adopting a 2020 budget of

nearly 160 billion euros (\$177.5 billion). The bloc has lost just under 9 billion euros to tax fraud during 2002-2016, a report by the European Court of Auditors said earlier this year. Due to be launched in 2020, the EPP will be geared to investigating and pressing criminal charges in cases crossing the EU's internal borders, particularly those affecting the budget since November 2017. Twenty-two of the EU's 28 member states are participating so far.

Much of the EPP's efficacy will depend on Kovesi's ability to convince member states to give it the prosecutors and resources it needs. Some, such as Hungary, have not joined, saying prosecutorial powers should remain at the national level. Kovesi will run the EPP from a central office in Luxembourg alongside one European prosecutor from each member state.

Investigations will be run by delegated prosecutors nationally.

Their number will be determined after negotiations with justice ministers and general prosecutors in each state. Kovesi said estimating the number of potential cases EPP will handle and the number of prosecutors needed in each state are immediate priorities. "It is possible that in some states, the desire to have more prosecutors is bigger, maybe other states will not want to have that many," Kovesi said. "There will certainly be talks and negotiations to solve this problem."

Prior to leading Romania's anti-corruption agency, Kovesi was the country's prosecutor general and worked her way up from being a prosecutor in the central Romanian city of Sibiu. Though she has protection, she still enjoys doing the things she used to do back then - walking, going to the park or gym, and attending church and has no plans to change her life in Luxembourg. "It is what I applied for, what I wanted," Kovesi said. "For now my main concern is to ensure the institution has the budget and resources it needs to work." —Reuters



In new role she will tackle crimes affecting budget

## German conservative leader faces rebellion after poll trouncing

**BERLIN:** German conservative leader Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer yesterday faced a rebellion by party members angry at a humiliating election result in eastern Thuringia state where the Christian Democrats (CDU) lost voters to both the far-left and far-right. Discontent within the CDU grew louder after their fourth setback at the ballot box this year under Kramp-Karrenbauer, who has countered mounting doubts about her suitability to lead the conservatives in the next federal election in 2021 since she became chairwoman in December.

The CDU dropped from first to third place in Thuringia, falling behind the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) in second and the far-left Linke party, which came out first with just over 30% of the vote. The inconclusive election has put the onus on the CDU to ditch its long-established policy of ostracizing the Linke, which conservative leaders deem the reincarnation of the Communist party that ruled East Germany until 30 years ago.

Thuringia's Linke-led coalition with the centre-left Social Democrats (SPD) and the Greens lacks a majority to continue governing and needs the CDU on board for a stable coalition. All parties refuse to work with the AfD, which they accuse of racist rhetoric against Muslim migrants. Mike Mohring, CDU leader in Thuringia, led the charge against his party's position, saying it was up to him, and not Chancellor Angela Merkel or Kramp-Karrenbauer, to decide on a policy reversal that opens the door for a possible coalition with the Linke.

"I do not rule out talks with those who respect our constitution and want to build Thuringia with us," Mohring told public broadcaster MDR. "I do not need Berlin for the question of how we can take responsibility for the sake of our state." Ingo Senftleben, former CDU leader in Brandenburg who resigned last month after his party fell to third place in a regional election, was more direct.

### 'Altkatastrophe'

"People don't want ideological trenches and that's why the Linke and CDU should be able to hold talks," he told the Handelsblatt business daily. He added that the CDU should not block the will of the people. A poll published after the election in Thuringia on Sunday showed that more than 70% of CDU voters in the eastern state want their party to join a Linke-led coalition. Kramp-Karrenbauer, known as AKK, has been weakened by gaffes and a perception among voters and a large section of the CDU that she is a continuation of Merkel's centrist path.

Her authority has been further eroded by her failure to revive the conservatives' fortunes at the ballot box. The party suffered painful losses at the European Parliament elections in May and three elections in eastern German regions. The election in Thuringia exposed deep polarization among German voters. The Linke and AfD together won more than half of the vote, leaving the CDU, the centre-left SPD, the Greens and the liberal Free Democrats with no majority.

Mass-selling Bild newspaper blamed this polarization on Merkel's and Kramp-Karrenbauer's centrist political path, which makes it difficult for voters to distinguish between the mainstream parties and pushes them to extremes. "Merkel's strategy of absolute open-mindedness for the sake of colorful coalitions as well as her tactic of adopting policies from the Greens and the Social Democrats has failed," Bild wrote. "Angela Merkel and CDU leader Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer could share a prize for causing the (voter) exodus that brought us here. Altkatastrophe!" —Reuters



**BERLIN:** (Left to right) The leader of Germany's conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU) party Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer looks on as the CDU's top co-candidate for Thuringian state elections Mike Mohring is kissed by German Chancellor Angela Merkel during a leadership meeting of the CDU at their headquarters in Berlin yesterday. —AFP

## EU nations agree Brexit delay until Jan 31 as UK PM seeks election

**LONDON:** The European Union agreed a three-month flexible delay yesterday to Britain's departure from the bloc as Prime Minister Boris Johnson pushes for an election after opponents forced him to request an extension he had vowed never to ask for. Just days before the United Kingdom is formally due to leave the EU on Oct 31 at 2300 GMT, Brexit is hanging in the balance, with British politicians no closer to reaching a consensus on how, when or even if the divorce should take place.

Johnson, who became prime minister in July by pledging, "do or die", to deliver Brexit on Oct 31, was compelled to request a postponement after he was defeated in parliament over the sequencing of the ratification of his divorce deal. The 27 countries that will remain in the EU agreed yesterday to put off Brexit until the end of January with an earlier departure possible should the faction-ridden UK parliament ratify the separation deal Johnson agreed with the bloc.

"The EU27 has agreed that it will accept the UK's request for a Brexit 'flexextension' until 31 January 2020," European Council President Donald Tusk said in a tweet, referring to the

concept of a flexible extension. EU member states will need Britain to formally reply to its offer of a three-month delay before launching a "written procedure" whereby governments will have 24 hours to accept or reject.

"We can only launch the written procedure when we have the agreement of the UK government on the text," a senior EU official said. Johnson is obliged by legislation passed by parliament last month to accept an extension once offered. Johnson will respond to the EU's delay offer once he has reviewed the details, his spokesman said yesterday. Two senior EU diplomats confirmed that the written procedure period agreed was 24 hours, effective from the time London accepts the offer of a Brexit delay from Oct 31 to Jan 31.

Britain's departure has already been delayed twice—from March 29 and April 12 - after Johnson's predecessor, Theresa May, failed three times to get her deal ratified by parliament. With British politics still paralyzed over carrying out Brexit 3-1/2 years after a 52%-48% referendum vote in favor of leaving the EU, Johnson is demanding parliament approve an election on Dec. 12 in return for more time to adopt his deal. But he needs the support of two-thirds, or 434, of the 650 lawmakers for a new election. A House of Commons vote was due later on.

### 'Flexextension'

The EU, forged from the ruins of World War Two as a way to prevent another devastating conflict in Europe, is fatigued by Britain's Brexit crisis but

## State of emergency declared; California wildfires rage

**HEALDSBURG:** Thousands of firefighters battled into the early hours yesterday, losing ground to the huge blaze burning through the famed Sonoma wine region in northern California. California's governor declared a statewide emergency on Sunday as the wind-driven Kincade Fire spread to more than 34,000 acres, forcing residents to flee. In Los Angeles, meanwhile the local fire department issued mandatory evacuation orders after a "very dynamic" brush fire broke out west of a major highway, US 405, near The Getty museum.

Refugees from the Kincade blaze, the largest of more than a dozen burning throughout the state, recalled hasty departures as they waited it out in the safety of a community center in Petaluma, California. "The police came with loudspeakers. We weren't expecting it," said Kathy Amundson, who had to get her 90-year-old mother Joy into a wheelchair and then into the car for the trip out. "We smelled smoke, we couldn't see

it," she said. "Looks like our home is safe but the fear is wind blowing ambers and then it starts new fires."

Others were not so lucky. The fire has destroyed dozens of homes and vineyards, including the renowned 150-year-old Soda Rock Winery. "We've seen the news. We are devastated," the owners said in a Facebook message, adding that all staff at the winery - located in the town of Healdsburg, 70 miles north of San Francisco - are safe. At least two hospitals in Santa Rosa evacuated patients over the weekend to other facilities.

The Kincade Fire - the most devastating in California this year - ignited Wednesday and spread quickly due to powerful gusts of up to 90 miles per hour. As of early yesterday, it was only five percent contained. "Over 3,000 people are working on the fire as we speak, making sure the evacuation is going smoothly and people are taking it seriously," said state governor Gavin Newsom. An estimated 180,000 people were under mandatory evacuation orders, including in parts of Santa Rosa and a large swath of Sonoma County all the way to the Pacific Ocean.

Nearly 80,000 structures are threatened, according to the county sheriff's office. And fire officials said they did not expect the fire to be contained before November 7. Authorities said the area would remain under dangerous red flag conditions until yesterday morning. "Things will improve as we head into

## Flights, fake passports: 'VIP packages' enticing Vietnamese to Britain

**NGHE AN:** For up to \$50,000, Vietnamese migrants can get the "VIP package" to Britain-flight, fake passport and even a lawyer-illegal, but billed as safer than cheaper overland routes by people smugglers who provide a menu of options for those trying to reach the UK. Details of well-oiled smuggling routes spanning Vietnam to Europe have come under renewed scrutiny after 39 people were found dead in a truck in Britain.

Initially identified as Chinese, many are now believed to be Vietnamese after families came forward saying they feared their relatives were in the refrigerated trailer. The nature of their journey depends on how much money their families can stump up. Faster, comfortable and supposedly safer, the "VIP package" goes for as much

as \$50,000 - compared to around \$15,000 for so-called "grass" overland journey, according to several experts AFP spoke to.

The VIP deal offers travel documents and flights to Europe, often to France, Germany or Spain, before the final passage into the UK. "They put you in contact directly with a group in France that helps you at that end," Chung Pham, who works with Locate International, a UK-based group that helps to find missing Vietnamese migrants in Britain told AFP. Once in the UK, they are even provided with Vietnamese lawyers and translators in the event they are caught by police. "It shows you how organized and systematized they are," Pham said.

Britain has long been a prime destination for Vietnamese migrants thanks to well-entrenched criminal networks offering work-though often at lower salaries than promised. The poor central provinces of Vietnam are riddled with people smugglers and brokers with underground contacts stretching across the world. Families sell land or take on huge loans for the journeys, believing the investment will eventually pay itself back several times over. —AFP



**LONDON:** An anti-Brexit activist holds an EU flag as they demonstrate outside of the Houses of Parliament in London yesterday. —AFP

kept not to be held responsible for an economically tumultuous "no-deal" rupture. French President Emmanuel Macron had been the main hurdle to an extension, arguing there had to be a good reason for a delay and that the British needed to break their own political deadlock.

But a source close to Macron said the prospect of an election in Britain had strengthened significantly. The source stressed that the third Brexit delay would come with conditions, including a refusal to renegotiate the divorce agreement and giving a green light to other EU countries to meet without Britain to

discuss the bloc's future.

An EU diplomat said the hope was that the British would use the postponement wisely. Even though the United Kingdom is set to leave, it will have a legal obligation to nominate a new commissioner for the EU's powerful executive body. The latest delay plan envisages that Britain could be out on Dec 1 or Jan 1 should parliament ratify the agreement in November or December respectively, according to diplomats who deal with Brexit in Brussels. But in London, there was no consensus on an election which Johnson says is needed to break the deadlock. —Reuters



**HEALDSBURG:** Firefighters survey Soda Rock Winery as it begins to burn in Healdsburg, California. —AFP

today but we need to be resilient," a spokesman for the National Weather Service told a news conference.

Sonoma County Sheriff Mark Essick told a news conference that hundreds of police officers backed by the National Guard had been deployed in regions under evacuation orders to check property and prevent looting.

Several other fires have erupted throughout the state in the last week, fueled by high winds, bone-dry conditions and temperatures in the 80s and 90s Fahrenheit. One major fire - the Tick Fire - in the southern part of the state, north of Los Angeles, also prompted evacuations and destroyed a number of homes near Santa Clarita. —AFP



**NGHE AN:** Relatives of 33-year-old Nguyen Van Hung who is feared to be among the 39 people found dead in a truck in Britain, sit outside a house in Dien Chau district of Vietnam's Nghe An province yesterday. —AFP