

Interview



Georgi Spasov, managing partner, Spasov & Bratanov

Caroline Poynton talks to Georgi Spasov on his experiences of running a Bulgarian law firm and his leadership role as managing partner

Can you tell us a little bit about your background and your experience of the Bulgarian legal market?

During my time studying and practising law, I have seen and lived through many changes over the last 12 years, not the least being the dramatic end of the communist regime in Bulgaria in 1990. After graduating in 1988, I became a university law lecturer and, having completed a year-long academic research placement in Japan, returned home in 1990 to find a new Bulgaria and a completely different country. It was only at this point that a Bulgarian legal market began to develop.

My father is a lawyer who continues to act as counsel to my firm today and, although I scarcely realised it at the time, my father's commitment to and enjoyment of the law influenced my decision to become a lawyer myself. Before the 'velvet revolution', he had practised in a society based on a centralised economy and as a sole practitioner; regulations at that time did not allow for law firms as we know them today. My father specialised in property law, which then was the most challenging sphere of legal advice and litigation.

After 1990, the areas of banking and financial law started to

develop in Bulgaria, and having spent some time with a financial brokerage company, I was involved in setting up one of the first privately held Bulgarian banks. This was particularly challenging because, even as little as ten years ago, no standard form of contract existed – no employment contracts, no letters of credit. Bank guarantees and the negotiation and establishment of correspondent contracts with international banks were something that had to be created from scratch. It was only when I was awarded a British Council scholarship to study banking and finance law in London for a year that I really began to understand how much large, international law firms can accomplish, and that the law is a very advanced and dynamic field of knowledge and practice. What I had been taught in Sofia was how to be a lawyer – developing a law firm and running it as a business was, at that time, a concept unknown to me.

What leadership qualities have you developed as managing partner of Spasov & Bratanov?

On my return from London, I joined a small Sofia law firm as a name partner and for the first time began to work as part of a team. It was my ambition at this time, however, to become a legal expert rather than a

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businessman, so I gladly handed over the public relations, the marketing and the client maintenance aspects of my job to the managing partner. It wasn't until 1999, having acted for some years at a branch office of an international law firm active in central and eastern Europe, that I established Spasov & Bratanov and became managing partner. I quickly found that I could no longer elude the responsibilities of leadership. I had no choice but to undertake a self-imposed 'crash course' in law firm management from the perspective of an 'entrepreneur', i.e., how to develop and run a law firm as a business, a western concept with which I now had to rapidly catch up.

First and foremost, it became obvious that the responsibilities of my new leadership role had broadened. These included not only stewardship of the financial good health of the firm and the provision of a stable and well-managed work environment for my partners, associates and staff, but also responsibility for the firm's image and external relations. I now needed to develop and maintain both local and international client relationships, as well as with international law firm. Traditional, long-standing relationships with local government and municipal departments as well as with the local legal community were also vital to maintain.

What specific tasks did you find yourself managing?

One of my first tasks was to relocate our firm to new offices. Even in the age of the virtual world, traditional communication is inherent in the practice of law. In Bulgaria, being settled at one address for a very long time is a sign of conservatism, solidity and reliability; any change - other than steady expansion - may be viewed negatively. Fortunately, our move was to a prestigious part of town and into a building equipped to modern, international standards.

Although advertising of legal services by members of the Bar is quite restricted in Bulgaria, I found it necessary to take a much more active marketing role within the allowed limits. What had previously been pleasant social diversions - embassy functions, chamber of commerce events - now became a vital part of my new 'networking' role. Being a latecomer to these areas, I was pleasantly surprised that they proved to be the basis for securing more interesting pieces of legal work.

Frequent overseas travel to see clients, attendance of international conferences and seminars also became important. Coming from a recently emerged and non-traditional jurisdiction such as Bulgaria, it is vital that local law firms working with international clients and lawyers and on behalf of international investors, develop a profile outside the country. Though a website is useful and telecommunications crucial, there is no substitute for face-to-face meetings, even in this virtual age.

Have you any tips or advice for those taking on the role of managing a law firm?

There seems to be a simple formula for the successful management of a law firm; keep your clients happy and keep members of the firm happy. Implementing this deceptively simple formula, however, may be more difficult than it seems. Clients are happy if you do an excellent job, for which they're charged less than expected! Good management should start at the beginning and, in common with most other law firms, training and mentoring of trainees is a vital investment for the firm's future. Trainees need to learn to be lawyers

and, just as importantly, they need to learn to be part of the law firm. Since any firm taking on trainees will be exposed both professionally and financially, it is important that, in consultation with the partners, the managing partner decides early on as to whether the firm intends to retain the trainee and, if so, to groom and encourage the trainee to make a future with the firm.

Inflow of assignments and corresponding inflow of cash is a further managing partner responsibility. Sometimes it is easier to procure the job than it is to get paid. And though larger, more time-consuming projects are most desirable, these are often the ones where payment is most delayed. At times like this, it is helpful to have understanding and well-informed partners - with no surprises!

Ideally, and this is perhaps only achievable in a small firm, the managing partner should monitor and control all the firm's material output. It is our firm's policy that at least two of the partners are responsible for the output on every single issue. While it is said that 'two lawyers means three opinions', we find this practice viable and an added value for the client. It also results in useful internal discussions on more complicated issues that are productive and beneficial to the overall performance of each lawyer, particularly under the current restructuring of Bulgarian legislation. While each partner is certainly able to handle complicated problems individually, I find the team approach reduces both stress and risk.

You seem particularly concerned with the well-being of your colleagues. Is this an important part of the managing partner's role?

The success and strength of any business lies with the employees. Consequently, a managing partner looking for the growth of their law firm must look to the well-being of the staff and partners.

Stress in particular, is an unavoidable part of a lawyer's life - both at work and in private life - and stress management is a difficult issue but one which a managing partner, as leader, should not ignore, even a managing partner who feels that a certain amount of work-related stress is rather healthy. My partners and I are constantly aware of the conflict between work and home demands - and I make a special point of getting to know and talking to my partners' spouses as much as possible to try to anticipate any potential problems. Being a small firm gives me the luxury of knowing my colleagues very well.

The financial dimension of the practice is obviously a key factor in job satisfaction for any lawyer. As a Canadian lawyer once said to me, if you sell your time and your brains, you need to be comfortable with the reward you receive. It is the managing partner's responsibility to ensure that all partners are well-informed and regularly updated on the financial standing of the firm and that they actively participate in future planning, problem-solving and decision making. Where there is a sound business plan and strict financial rules that are transparent and fair to each partner, then there is no tension. In my experience, secrecy and lack of transparency can only result in insecurity and the breakdown of trust and confidence amongst the partners - the downfall of more than one firm. □

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