



Bending Reality and Scaling Up: Maravela | Asociatii's First Five Years

DAVID STUCKEY / 25 FEBRUARY 2019



Alina Popescu

Bending Reality and Scaling Up: Maravela | Asociatii's First Five Years

This year marks Maravela | Asociatii's fifth anniversary. To mark the occasion, we sat down with Maravela | Asociatii Partner Alina Popescu to learn more about the challenges the firm has overcome in its first five years, its successes, and its plans for the future.

CEELM: Maravela | Asociatii has now been on the market for five years now. How has that time been for you?

Alina: Hell and heaven at the same time (laughs). It was a very tough period, but full of achievements, and full of fulfillment. We feel great now after the five years because we have managed to get past the difficult period, and we can now say that we are looking at a totally different picture of ourselves and our firm. So it was a “successful bet,” so to speak.

The market was – and still is – very difficult, so it’s not an easy place for legal start-ups. There are various reasons for that. One, of course, is the number of lawyers, which is very high for the amount of business in Romania. And nowadays also there are more and more law firms.

Second, of course, is the ever-increasing pressure from clients on fees. You can feel this even more in Romania because clients expect Romanian law firms to bill less than law firms in other regions, and that’s a reality we have to face – even though in Romania (and probably other Eastern European countries) the work can be more difficult due to the poor quality of the legislative framework and the very high amount of legislative changes. So that’s another thing that makes things very difficult.

Finally, there is also a difficulty now in finding team members, because generally the overall quality of education is not as high as in other regions, so it’s more difficult to find people that would be able to deliver the standard of quality that you expect.

CEELM: Do you mean in terms of technical quality, or in terms of business savvy?

Alina: It’s both. We know the plagiarism problem. I’m not sure I want to talk about this too much (laughs), but unfortunately, it’s the framework we’ve been working under for a while. I hope things will gradually change. We are also facing an emigration problem, because lots of smart people go to study and work abroad, and that’s another difficulty. These three issues make things very difficult for a legal startup.

CEELM: Looking back at your early days, what was your biggest fear/challenge?

Alina: The biggest fear, which proved unfounded, was related to developing a client base. We worked a lot in developing a business model that would work, and of course we had to be very careful in terms of fees, quality, and client care, so those were the three aspects that we worked enormously on, and very successfully as it turned out. But the funny thing is that our biggest fear turned out not be true, because it turned out that actually building a team was, and is, much more difficult than building a client base.

CEELM: Speaking of building the team: How big is the firm now?

Alina: We're currently about 20 lawyers. But there are many challenges. The first is to get the right people in terms of work ethics, and of course knowledge. We have always been very open in sharing know-how, and we think that people who work with us will grow into very competitive professionals. But it's very difficult to find people who are smart and have the requisite legal knowledge, and at the same time have the commitment to building something. When you want to build something great, the amount of work and the discipline required are very high.

CEELM: What's the next step in the Maravela story?

Alina: We are working on acquiring a more pronounced international dimension. I know this sounds very vague, but we've been discussing opening a Maravela office in a different country. This is one of the plans we're working on, of course besides the normal development plan of growing both client base and our team. We would like to reach a 40-headcount level, in terms of lawyers, and within the next five years we hope that this will become a reality. Bearing in mind the difficulty of growing a team that is able to deliver a really high standard of quality. Because it's very easy to grow your team when you have work coming in, but it's hard to find the level of people that meet your standards.

CEELM: Really? You're thinking of expanding outside Romania? Which jurisdictions are you considering?

Alina: I can't provide many details at this point, but we are looking mainly to the jurisdictions that bring lots of business to Romania.

CEELM: And is there a timeline?

Alina: We are very closely monitoring the markets right now and we expect to reach a decision on our development plan within the following year. The implementation period will of course depend on the final development strategy.

CEELM: Ok. Back to Romania. What kind of capabilities are you looking to develop?

Alina: Legal technology. Both in terms of expanding our ability to assist clients with technology-related matters – we are working on expanding our IP practice group, our Data Privacy practice group, and of course our Technology, Media, and Communications group – and in terms of developing the technological tools we can use internally to make our work for clients more efficient and streamlined.

CEELM: Is there anything else you're excited about in 2019?

Alina: Oh yes. We are actively looking to grow our International Arbitration practice, and we are already working on our first ICSID case as a law firm. It's not the first for our founding partners, of course, but it's the first for our law firm, so we hope we will have a contribution to a successful outcome. That's one other area we will be working on in terms of classical legal business development in 2019, and we hope that the political background will be better, so that we can continue to carry on business as usual, with a little help from the political side, if at all possible.

CEELM: The political side? What in particular would you like to change there?

Alina: I would like to be able to read the news without finding out that the European Parliament and the European Commission have warned Romania again on various positions and various topics that are far away from European principles and that may drive talent and businesses away, and I would very much like to see an enhanced quality of the legislative framework. That would make our lives as lawyers much easier.

CEELM: To wrap up: If you could sum up your feelings about looking back at Maravela's first five years in one word, and your expectations for the next five years in another, what would those words be?

Alina: Summing up in one word is impossible as there are many facets and no one word is enough to describe these periods.

The past five years have been about being faithful to our values, believing in our vision, and turning this vision into reality. This took a lot of effort, courage, and resilience, as well as freedom of mind and a sense of balance. But if I had to choose a single concept, it would be "bending reality."

We do not expect the next five years to be much different. A successful business needs to be permanently evolving, developing, and reinventing itself. It continuously needs all the things mentioned above and many others. However, the scale of our business will (hopefully) be different and we expect that the already acquired business experience will help us navigate more easily. Hence, my choice for this period would be "scaling up."

This Article was originally published in Issue 5.12 of the CEE Legal Matters Magazine. If you would like to receive a hard copy of the magazine, you can subscribe here.

