



Ondřej Peterka: In all countries we operate as one firm

PETERKA & PARTNERS is a truly unique law firm. Its majority owner Ondřej Peterka, and his partners have built a firm in Prague, which operates identically in Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Ukraine, and, most recently, also in Croatia. "We operate as one company, which is particularly important for our clients. We have one 'political' culture, one IT, one conflict of interest control, one pricing policy, one management, one client relationship team, and one client

satisfaction programme. We behave like a corporation, which is a key benefit for our clients, who are mostly global or European multinationals. The trend is that these corporations want to work with fewer and fewer law firms globally, and regional law firms are the exact answer to this trend," says Peterka in an interview with us, which also delves into his other plans for the countries of the former Yugoslavia (as well as other markets).



PETERKA & PARTNERS has been operating in Croatia since March. What was the journey to opening this new office like?

We had to obtain a licence according to local regulations. Apparently, we are one of the first firms from the European Union to enter the local legal market with 100% ownership, as we insist on and did in other jurisdictions. Croatia now complements our regional structure very well, as a number of our clients have been requesting work from us in the countries of the former Yugoslavia for quite some time. We used to advise through local firms, but it turned out that coordinating such services directly from Zagreb – because Croatia is the largest of these jurisdictions with EU membership – made much more sense. Moreover, the countries there are close to each other linguistically and culturally, just as it was in Czechoslovakia.

Even though there was a war, cooperation between Croatia and Serbia, for example, is very strong. Croatia is interesting for multinational companies – and PETERKA & PARTNERS fits the bill. In addition, there is a special relationship with the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Poland, which is also reflected in private investors investing in real estate and other projects. All these motivations came together for us to help us make the decision to open an office. Just a few weeks after opening, we can see that it really works. It's the easiest start we've ever had.

How big is your Croatian office? And how big should it be in the future?

We currently have three lawyers in Croatia and are preparing for the arrival of a fourth. And this is after only a few weeks of being open. Our immediate goal is 10 lawyers; ideally, we will aim for 20. We would like to become one of the 10 largest law firms in Croatia. This is the way we have been gradually building our other offices.

According to your press release, the office is also to be the "contact point for the coordination of legal services for the former Yugoslavia". In addition to Croatia, you mentioned Serbia. Where do you see other business opportunities there?

Especially in Slovenia. Very often we have cases where Slovenia is in demand together with Croatia. But Bosnia and Herzegovina is also interesting. Many mandates include all the countries of the former Yugoslavia.

Let's talk about PETERKA & PARTNERS in general. You stress that it is one firm, not a network of cooperating offices...

That's right, I am the majority owner of all of the offices in each country. **We operate as one company, which is essential, especially for clients. We have one "political" culture, one IT, one conflict of interest control, one pricing policy, one management, one client relationship team, and one client satisfaction programme. We behave like a corporation, which is a key benefit for our clients, who are mostly global or European multinationals. The trend is that these corporations want to work**



with fewer and fewer law firms globally, and regional law firms are the exact answer to this trend. Since we are able to offer them coverage across the region, this means simplification in terms of the number of offices, but also a unified approach in all of the countries where we work for them.

How big is PETERKA & PARTNERS at this point? How many people work for the firm?

We have about 150 lawyers + full administration, marketing, finance, etc. An interesting fact is that about 70 percent of our associates are women.

Can we say that the Czech office is still the most important?

It still is, mainly for historical reasons, also the management resides there. But our Polish branch is catching up and it's only a matter of time before they will be just as big in terms of the number of lawyers. But other offices are also developing. We are built on the principle that all our offices are equal in our internal organization, which benefits all of them. This is also why the Polish office has been so successful, as it has become a natural window for the expansion of Polish companies into the region. And those companies want to work with Polish lawyers. So, it is certainly not the case that all of the important clients are managed by the Czech office.

And how is your Slovak office?

In terms of size, it is the third largest one, after Prague and Warsaw. We have been in Slovakia since 2001, one year after establishing our office in the Czech Republic. Slovakia has been strategic for us from the beginning and if we had not opened it, we would not have been able to finance further expansion. By the way, we operate without external financing, all of our operations have been financed from our profits. Over time we have found that you can only be in Slovakia if you reach a certain size

and are not dependent on just one or two key clients. We have reached that critical size and we are benefiting from it.

You also have an office in Ukraine. How does it function now, during the war?

We are surprised by how positively it works. Last year, all of our Ukrainian lawyers came to the Czech Republic for some time, worked in our Prague office and we arranged accommodation for them in Prague. Subsequently, they returned home. And what is most surprising: since the outbreak of the war, we have not been in the red in Ukraine for a single month; we still show a profit. Our clients continue to operate there and need our legal support.

How are your other branches doing?

Our offices in Budapest and Bucharest are of comparable size to Kyiv. They are very functional and profitable. They are developing gradually and are respected in their countries. Then we have smaller offices in Croatia, which we talked about, where the office will grow progressively, and in Bulgaria, where we will remain rather smaller. But interestingly enough, many of our large and major clients have started working with us in Bulgaria. So, we also look at our offices through such synergies and their overall roles. **I say there is no small branch, and there is no small work for big clients.**

Do you still travel between branches yourself, or is that no longer necessary?

I have reduced my travelling a lot; we deal with most things online and remotely and we have an IT system specially developed for us. But I still travel, as do the other partners. Especially for social reasons, like when we organize teambuilding for the entire company. We do not have to travel so much to see clients, but we do have to talk to our people. So that we remain one firm and our offices do not drift apart and still share one firm-wide culture.



Are you recruiting?

Yes everywhere, and especially in the Czech Republic; we still have open positions advertised on the web.

And what do you entice them to?

To be part of a team with a regional presence; the ability to work within one firm with colleagues from other jurisdictions. We are the only Czech law firm with such a regional concept. We also attract them with the type of work we get from our clients, which usually spans several countries. So, the absolute cooperation of everyone is necessary. **We are a firm for the 21st century, we are not built on internal competition, but on internal cooperation.** This also means internal transparency, not internal fights. Any lawyers who wanted to have them had to leave the firm. We are also family friendly, I myself have three children, and my wife is Danish, so I am very much influenced by the Scandinavian approach to life. There is time for work and time for family, that is the only way to build an efficient company, so our policy is to have a normal life outside of work. I talked about the proportion of women in our company, and also look take a quick look at who runs our branches. The main ones – in Prague, Warsaw, and Bratislava – are mainly women, there is only one man. That is how we grew as a firm and what we believe in. We think of it as a marathon, as a long-term project, we do not want our people to burn out after three years. So that is what kind of firm we are attracting them to.

In the Czech Republic, many law firms complain about the lack of "new" quality lawyers, many of whom do not want to join the bar. What is the situation in this aspect – in your own experience – in other countries?

It is a similar issue in Poland and Slovakia. People generally want to work less, that is the general trend, but in the other countries we have talked about this trend is not as strong.

We talked about the Croatian office, about the countries of the former Yugoslavia. But do you have another region in your sights now?

In addition to the other countries of the former Yugoslavia, we are also considering a region we could call the former Austria-Hungary. And then also Scandinavia, including the Baltics.

How about Germany or another country in Western Europe?

This can be a topic for the next generation. It would be a gigantic move; it would be possible in a situation where we already have, say, 20 branches in medium-sized countries. Then clients would push us into these larger markets as well. But at the present time, such a move would be premature.



Mr. Peterka is the Founder and Managing Partner of PETERKA & PARTNERS, which was established in 2000. At the beginning of his career, he operated in France for Coudert Brothers and Sokolow Dunaud, Mercadier & Carreras, then in Prague with Gide Loyrette Nouel. In addition to the Prague Law School, he also studied at the Remes Law School. In his professional practice, he focuses mainly on litigation and group management.

The article was published in the original Czech version in the magazine "Lawyers & Business" 3/2023 and translated to English upon agreement with Mr. Jan Januš, Editor-in-Chief.