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Qualities and Motivations for Female Leadership according to Irina Paliashvili

*In a conversation with **Irina Paliashvili**, Managing Partner of RULG-Ukrainian Legal Group, we focused on the values, principles and aspirations through the eyes of a female leader. Irina shared some of her own and some borrowed tips for young lawyers, talked to us about gender balance in the legal profession, and told us what motivates her and how that has evolved throughout her career.*

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— Irina, what had influenced your choice of the legal profession? Were you always confident that law would be your lifetime career?

— I decided to become a lawyer at the young age of 7, and I am not joking! At that time, under the Soviet system, there was no “legal business,” there were no private law firms or a legal market, but I was absolutely sure that I would follow in the footsteps of my father, who was a prominent Georgian legal scholar. Like him, I was planning on an academic and teaching career at first, but with the collapse of the Soviet Union, I could not resist the extraordinary chances that landed on my generation of young lawyers, and went into law practice. I started as an in-house counsel, but then launched private practice. In February 1992, in the first months of independent Ukraine, I co-founded one of the first Western-style law firms in Kyiv, so at that time our

generation actually created the market that came to be so well-established today.

At the current stage of my career, academia returned to me – I frequently serve as an expert witness on Ukrainian law in international arbitrations and litigations, which requires a strong academic background. The School of International Law and International Relations (IIR) of the Kyiv National Taras Shevchenko University gave me this academic foundation. My class was incredibly lucky – we were taught by an All-Star team of law professors. Even the current professors at IIR are either their students or students of their students. I have a lifelong gratitude to them and honor the memory of those who are no longer with us: Professor Igor Lukashuk, Professors Matveev – father and son, Vasyl Kysil and Olexander Zadorozhnyi.

– *For many years you have been splitting your time between two countries (Ukraine and the United States). Professionally it is clear that it is possible to work remotely, and we saw it in the context of the current lockdown. But how do you organize your private and family life under such circumstances?*

– Practically through trial and error I embraced the format of remote working many years ago, long before it became a general trend. That happened at the root of globalization, when new technologies had only just begun to appear, and we had to master them, which at first was a challenge for me. For instance, it took me a long time to give up on my Blackberry while everybody had already moved to smartphones, I only did this because my then teenage daughter declared that I embarrassed her! In general, I recommend keeping abreast of cutting-edge technologies and never missing new opportunities – the old excuse “I became a lawyer to stay away from technology” – does not work anymore.

Today, amid the lockdown, it is not only remote work, but also virtual professional and personal communications, which is a new and not-so-welcome development. I understand that all the Zoom, Teams, Google Meets and other platforms have saved us under these circumstances, but I do hope very much that after the lockdown is over, we will be able to get back to live communications.

One of the biggest challenges we are facing professionally, are virtual arbitration and court hearings. This is a new experience for all participants of proceedings, and it is hard to predict how it will affect the entire system of international dispute resolution. I have recently completed my first virtual hearing, and as promised, I will share my impressions with you in a separate article.

As to private life, while I am traveling it is important to always keep in touch with loved ones. Every day when I am away, I call my family, and we share the day's events, experiences and emotions. When my daughter was still at middle school, I started applying the “quality time” formula. When it is impossible to always stay together, we need to find time, like spending weekends or vacations just with each other, not being distracted by work or domestic routines. Now she has her own family and career, but she calls us every day, and spending “quality time” has become our family tradition.

– *How are things going for women lawyers in the United States? Especially with regard to holding senior positions in law firms and equal remunerations?*

– The situation is steadily improving, in large part thanks to professional organizations, such as the American Bar Association (ABA), which promotes the principles of diversity and gender balance and always seeks ways to implement these principles in practice. There were times when we gushed about the first female ABA president, but now equal representation in leading positions at the ABA is a well-established practice.

When I first came to the US for an internship at a prominent Chicago law firm, Jenner & Block, in the early 90-s, there were few women lawyers, and most of them were just starting their careers. Now that generation has matured, and they dramatically improved the gender balance in the profession at the middle and senior levels. Vice President Kamala Harris belongs to that generation, and look how she instantly transformed the Biden-Harris ticket into a modern and dynamic team.

— I read in one of your interviews how in the 90s you were the only woman-lawyer present at negotiations at a US law firm, and you were asked to serve coffee to everyone. Do you think this situation could happen in the present-day? What gender stereotypes do you or your colleagues face nowadays?

— This situation is very unlikely to happen in a present-day civilized business environment, where everyone has already embraced the idea of *visual* gender equality. However, there is a major stumbling block that still remains: the “glass ceiling.” It is evident when we look at the small number of women partners of law firms and other consulting companies, or in leadership positions of some professional organizations, or at conferences – when we see many women in the audience, but mostly men at panels. I always speak up if I see this, and often the response is “We could not find a female candidate.” But when I persist, it turns out that nobody even bothered to look. I agree with what Andriy Tsymbal, the Managing Partner for KMPG in Ukraine wrote for NV column: “Gender balance is no longer a formal nod to gender equality. This is a new factor of competitiveness. And the further we go, the stronger gender diversity will influence the success of companies.”

Gender balance in the international professional environment is an axiom, no one questions this objective – only the methods and the level of success are being debated.

In Ukraine, however, I was in for a surprise. About one and a half year ago, I was moderating a session on gender balance at Ukrainian ID, an international Economic and Humanitarian Forum, which is held annually in Kaniv. The organizer of this event is a woman, Nataliya Zabolotna, and this probably explains why her Forum features such an important aspect as “humanitarian”, which is usually overlooked at economic forums where the agendas are dominated by men.



I had 7 panelists at my session, who were prominent women leaders in various areas including media, business and law. Knowing that everyone is busy, I took great care in preparing materials on global gender equality. This Forum was happening at the same time as the elections in the European Union, when 70 EU leaders released a message, stating that “Equal representation is in everyone's interest. It is not a woman issue. Yet some still act as if women are a minority. Women are not a minority. Women and men should be equally represented when it comes to European leadership.”

This message inspired the main topic of my session: “Demanding, Adopting, Implementing Equal Representation and Shattering the Glass Ceiling.” But at the session, I was stunned when a couple of our panelists took hard paternalistic views, nearly denying women the general right to leadership, let alone equal representation. I, of course, knew that conservative views are quite common in some segments of Ukrainian society, I just did not expect them at this panel! I was delighted, however, when other panelists joined the debate, and the majority of them strongly defended equal gender representation.

The glass ceiling can and must be shattered. For example, business development continues to be largely male dominated, especially given that most senior leadership positions are still occupied by men, aka the “Old Boys Club”. But because business development is key for achieving career goals, especially in the consulting sector, I call upon women to enter this field, to grow self-confidence, to establish and actively maintain professional contacts. It is also very important to support one another, to share experiences and connections, and to engage in the mentorship of younger colleagues.

Another important factor is generating original ideas and finding or creating your own professional niche. For example, after being frustrated with the lack of female speakers at professional conferences,

I established in 2006 and ran for ten years the ECA (Europe-Caucasus-Asia) Legal Forum, an informal network of leading business lawyers of the ECA economic region, which as of 2015 became a part of the International Bar Association (IBA).

In the past, a prevailing view used to be that men are more inclined to generate strategic ideas, and women are better in implementing them. But both – a brilliant idea and its excellent implementation - are essential for business development, so the secret is to successfully combine the two.

– ***What the word «leadership» embodies for you?***

– To me, leadership is what we just talked about – the ability to do both: to generate *and* implement the strategy. If a female leader combines the two, there is no limit to what she can achieve.

It is also important to develop an adequate response to crises because everyone look at leaders first during hard times. The Ukrainian legal business gives you good training in this respect.

In April of last year, when it became clear that the pandemic would lead us into a full-blown crisis, I worked on a message to my team, sharing planned anti-crisis measures, priorities and all other possibilities that would help us cope, and also reminding them that we already survived crises in 2004 (Orange Revolution) and 2008 (global economic crisis). After sending this message, incidentally I came across a similar message, which I wrote in 2014 after the outbreak of war. I forgot about that crisis, but I could still use 90% of that message for the current times. This shows that there were at least three serious crises that we overcame – with some losses – but each time getting back on our feet with new strength and new ideas, successful reorganizations, innovations and ultimately moving forward.

– ***Without what (or whom) your success would not be possible?***

– First, my parents have been a key inspiration – I was fascinated with their professions since early childhood. I have already talked about my father – one of his last books about law-enforcement bodies in Georgia, with a handwritten dedication to his family, has become my talisman. Passion for foreign languages came from my mom, who was a linguist specializing in English and French. And then, when I launched my own career and family, nothing would happen without their support, and also without mentors, close friends and a little bit of luck.

– ***What is the greatest motivator in your work?***

– Life motivators varied across different stages of my career, but it all began at a historic turning point when the Evil Soviet Empire was about to collapse, and then the Iron Curtain fell, the economy opened up, and new possibilities emerged, which we could not imagine in our wildest dreams. At that time, the key motivator was to jump as fast as possible into this swirl and launch a private practice. Following that, came the ambition to break through into a whole new level, and then came the responsibility for our business, for our clients and team.

Nowadays, when all this has been achieved, I am motivated by intellectual challenges, interactions with colleagues and friends, sharing my knowledge and experience, pro bono work at professional organizations such as IBA, US-Ukrainian Business Council (USUBC), by transforming our country and its legal system into a modern successful New Ukraine, and also by supporting culture and arts.

– ***How does your morning start?***

– Before lockdown, because I was always travelling – I usually woke up with the thought of «where am I?»; and during last few months – I wake up with the thought «why am I at home?»

– ***Please give some advice for women-lawyers starting their career.***

– I have so many tips, enough to fill up your entire issue! Let me try to pick the most important ones.

Besides the standard set of qualities, of which you hear all the time, a key quality for career development and leadership is composure, and not the kind with gritted teeth, but the kind with a smile and self-confidence, trusting your knowledge and abilities. I always remember a TV interview shown during the last years of the USSR, which Margaret Thatcher gave to three attack dogs of Soviet journalism. They lashed out at her with aggressive yelling and accusations, but she responded with competence and facts, always maintaining her impeccable demeanor, polite smile and elegant composure, making them retreat in shame from the battlefield. In critical situations, I think of this interview.

I can also share some tips I've learned from others. Normally, I am not a huge fan of motivational literature, but I do recommend an article, available on LinkedIn, from my fellow officer at IBA, Australian lawyer Shelley Dunstone. Having thought about many things in life, I was surprised that this idea had never occurred to me, so let's follow this advice together: "When you are required to perform a difficult or unpleasant task, do not focus directly on it. Instead, focus on what will happen after you've done it, the benefits that will flow, and how you will feel."

The last piece of advice, most relevant to present time, comes from my favorite journalist, Arkadiy Babchenko: "It turned out that the best investments are investments in social connections. They became an evolutionary advantage today. Have a tight, strong group of your own." And one more: "In a critical situation, you will not rise up to your expectations, but will fall to the level of your preparedness. Have an active position. Don't just stand by the sidelines. Fight for your country."

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