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Domestic leaders join forces for best friends-inspired alliance

Newly formed CIS Local Counsel Network is the region's first

Nine leading CIS firms

– including one of Slaughter and May's Russian best friends – have joined forces to create the region's first alliance network, *Legal Business* can reveal. The CIS Local Counsel Network (LCN), which formally launched in September, aims to target referrals from international law firms and also capture an increasing share of inter-CIS investment work.

'It's a development of the CIS Local Counsel Forum, which we've all been attending since it was established in June 2006,' said Dimitry Afanasiev, chairman of Russian LCN founder Egorov, Puginsky, Afanasiev & Partners (EPA&P). 'The problem is that the forum doesn't really have a practical application to make people money. It was originally set up as a conference to help global firms find the right lawyers in CIS jurisdictions, but we needed to stop thinking of ourselves as just local counsel and grow our respective firms to be truly self-sustaining.'

The leading local firms in each of the nine initial CIS countries were selected based on three criteria: that they were domestically owned and not affiliated with any international firm; that they were Westernised in their structure, practice and outlook; and that they were

The network's structure is based upon Slaughter and May's famous best friends network, with Afanasiev using the contacts and experience he has gained as head of a member firm in that alliance to help develop LCN. Hengeler Mueller partner Oleg de Lousanoff and Patrick

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Dimitry Afanasiev, EPA&P



what Afanasiev described as 'locally wired'.

Three of the chosen members – Vlasova Mikhel & Partners Law Firm (Belarus), Aequitas (Kazakhstan) and Turcan & Turcan (Moldova) – are the highest-ranked domestic firms in their respective chapters of *The Legal 500*, while the line-up is completed by RULG – Ukrainian Legal Group (Ukraine), Ameria (Armenia), Kalikova & Associates (Kyrgyzstan), and Ashgabat Consulting Team (Turkmenistan).

Dziewolski from Bredin Prat both attended the inaugural LCN meeting in EPA&P's Moscow office on 28 September.

Lawyers from the firms will attend annual training programmes in Moscow, while EPA&P will bear the brunt of the costs associated with aligning the firms' IT and document management systems.

'We are going to offer integrated teams on multinational deals, as opposed to just referring clients to each other,' Afanasiev said.

'Several law firms will work together as if they were one firm. It's the difference between creating a functioning institution rather than just having a yearly drinking session.'

Clients will have the final say over how deals are resourced, but when operating in these combined teams the originating law firm will retain absolute control of the client – a fact Afanasiev described as 'a matter of trust'.

The managing partners of each of the participating firms will chair the network on a rotating basis, with RULG president and CIS Local Counsel Forum founder Irina Paliashvili serving the first 12-month term.

Paliashvili revealed that talks are ongoing to extend the network with new members in the three remaining CIS countries – Georgia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan – but said that further growth would be 'entirely organic – we're not in any rush'.

Afanasiev was quick to stress that the network was not intended to replace the member firms' existing referral ties. 'Quite the contrary, in fact, as this creates a platform where we can integrate with other firms more closely and provide a stronger offering to Western companies looking to access CIS,' he explained. 'We're a group of absolute market leaders in an area where there's not a great deal of competition.'

Chris Johnson