



SANDRINE GIROUD

# Inside GILA: Geneva's new legal vision

**In an exclusive interview, GILA's president Sandrine Giroud provides insights into the association's inception and aspirations to transform the city into an international hub for law and legal services**

by benedetta miarelli

On June the 27th, the Geneva international legal association (GILA) made its debut on the world stage. The genesis of a new association invariably prompts inquiries into the motivations behind its establishment. As explained by its president **Sandrine Giroud**, drawing inspiration from developments in other cities and jurisdictions such as London, Paris, Dublin, Dubai, and Singapore – which have, for several years now, endeavored to promote their legal services as a distinct industry, akin to any other economic sector – the Geneva international legal association was conceived with a tripartite mission.

One of the main reasons why GILA was established to elevate Geneva's status as international capital for law and legal services, recognizing the city's expertise and tradition in the field. Secondly, GILA seeks to foster international recognition of Swiss law. Lastly, the association is committed to facilitating collaboration among diverse stakeholders in the legal and business communities. «I think we needed and wanted to have more recognition of law as an industry, as a business sector. As you can see, Switzerland and Geneva have much to offer. Swiss law has been recognized as being very contract friendly», Giroud states. Her words echo the findings of the ICC Dispute Resolution Statistics 2023, which highlight Swiss law as one of the preferred choices.

## GENEVA IN THE SWISS LEGAL LANDSCAPE

Expounding on Geneva's role within the Swiss legal landscape, Giroud emphasized its unique position: «It is one of the pivotal hubs in Switzerland. It has a very long-standing legal tradition and expertise. What makes Geneva special is certainly the "Genève Internationale", which is almost a trademark, but it is also a unique legal ecosystem». This term refers to Geneva's long tradition of hosting international and non-governmental organizations, scientific and academic actors, civil society and the private sector who today work together to find solutions to the global challenges of our societies.

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**Sandrine Giroud**



GILA BOARD

The president further elucidated the multifaceted nature of Geneva's legal community noting the robust Bar Association and its proactive approach to training and thought leadership. She also highlights the city's business milieu, with its unique position for commodity trading as well as banking and finance and an intense focus on commercial litigation and alternative dispute resolution. When asked about the strongest legal sectors in the region, Giroud adds, «I would like to mention mediation, as there is a strong boldness to support it. For instance, in Geneva, we adopted a law on mediation last year to promote it at the court level. The state is investing in offering free mediation services at the outset, so ADR (alternative dispute resolution) is really a strong field».

The legal landscape in Geneva is further enriched by its international character, as evidenced by the UN's annual Business and Human Rights Week: the world's largest annual gathering on business and human rights. «This is a discussion happening in Geneva, not New York», Giroud pointed out, underscoring the city's global significance.

The legal landscape in Geneva, as Giroud portrays it, is further enriched by the presence of not only numerous private practice lawyers but also a significant contingent of in-house counsel employed by multinational corporations and international organizations. «It's a very diverse and unique community», Giroud concludes.

## LOOKING FOR COHESION IN A HETEROGENEOUS COUNTRY

Addressing potential concerns about GILA's uniqueness within Switzerland, given the presence of multi-cantonal law firms, Giroud sees it positively: «I think it's a fantastic precedent for starting the discussion and trying to get recognition for legal services and Swiss law. It demonstrates the benefits of legal stakeholders teaming up and working together».

Switzerland is, however, an exceptionally heterogeneous country, both linguistically and in terms of its *de facto* internal divisions.

**«Our aim is to strengthen the recognition of the attractiveness of Swiss law within the international business community»**

**Aurélie Conrad Hari**

Considering this, is it likely that a cantonal-level association might potentially exacerbate internal differences in an already diverse country and how to address this concern?

On this, Giroud expressed that GILA focuses on collaboration and serves as a platform for discussion, exchanges, and cooperation. She emphasizes their hope to bridge differences and create a cohesive legal community that benefits the entire country by fostering dialogue among various stakeholders at both the Geneva and Swiss levels.

According to the Russian psychologist Vygotsky, language exists in a dynamic relationship with thought, capable of transforming and influencing it. With this perspective in mind, we asked the president whether English was the best choice for legal neutrality, particularly in the multilingual context of Switzerland. Giroud acknowledges the sensitivity of this issue, stating: «The aim is not to push aside our cultural and linguistic richness, but rather to address the reality of some disputes where all parties speak English, all the evidence is in English, and translators are needed for everything... It's not about disregarding our diversity but more about accommodating the reality that some disputes could be addressed more efficiently if English could be recognized as a procedural language».

## GILA'S PRESENT AND FUTURE

This pragmatic approach to language in

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Sandrine Giroud

legal proceedings appears to resonate with the local business community. GILA has, in fact, quickly gained support from the local entrepreneurial community, with Giroud noting, «the response has been hugely positive from all the stakeholders contacted. The business community is keen to have better legal services for commercial disputes and has quickly come on board».

Looking ahead, GILA has an ambitious agenda, including launching a website to serve as a



AURÉLIE CONRAD HARI

hub for connection and activity updates and organizing annually the Geneva international legal week (GILW) which will first take place between 10-12 March 2025. The association has established several commissions targeting specific areas of law and legal practice.

Addressing future challenges, Giroud acknowledges the complexities of managing a volunteer-based organization and emphasizes the need for efficiency and agility. «It's easy to start something, but the challenge is to keep it alive and meaningful. To achieve this, we must maintain the initiative's relevance and continue exchanges with other international initiatives»

## A BROAD CONSENSUS

Numerous firms have already joined GILA such as: Altenburger legal + tax, Bär & Karrer, BMG Avocats, BOREL & BARBEY, CMS Switzerland, FBT Avocats SA, Gabellon Legal, Jacquemoud Stanislas, Junod Halpérin, LALIVE, Lenz & Staehelin, MANGEAT, Monfrini Bitton Klein, Niederer Kraft Frey, OBERSON ABELS, Pestalozzi Attorneys at Law, Rhône Avocat-e-s, SIASSI MCCUNN BUSSARD, Schellenberg Wittmer, and Walder Wyss. The idea behind it is to stress the key role of the Geneva hub in an international context. An idea confirmed by **Aurélie Cornad Hari**, partner at Bär & Karrer: «As a founding member of GILA, we are excited to contribute to enhancing the position of Geneva as a leading global center for legal services. Our aim is to highlight the importance of legal expertise in promoting social and economic growth, and to work with our partners to strengthen the recognition of the attractiveness of Swiss law within the international business community and commercial relationships», she says.

Also according to NKF it is clear that GILA endeavors to create a collaboration between public and private sectors to boost the city's visibility on the global stage. «The founding of GILA was an amazing event that laid down the foundation of our commitment to enhance Geneva's national and international appeal in the legal services industry», say **Benjamin Humm**, partner at NKF and **Chappuis Grégoire**, senior associate at NKF and member of the GILA committee. 🇮🇵