



Born again

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The competition team at Martínez-Lage has operated under several guises in its 25 years at the forefront of Spanish antitrust enforcement. Emily Gray looks at the firm's latest incarnation.

Howrey Martínez-Lage was a competition powerhouse. In 2008, the Howrey juggernaut merged with Spain's premiere antitrust boutique to create a competition team with "more facilities and more power than ever before".

But just a few short years later, the Howrey star began to fade. The firm eventually dissolved in March, leaving the Spanish competition community wondering what would become of the antitrust group in Madrid.

The answer arrived on 6 April, when **Martínez-Lage Allendesalazar & Brokelmann** opened its doors.

Santiago Martínez-Lage was among the first Spanish practitioners to recognise the importance of competition law for the domestic market. In 1985, he opened Martínez-Lage & Asociados and quietly began establishing its position at the forefront of antitrust law. As other Spanish firms began to acknowledge the formative role that competition would play in years to come, many rushed to open offices in Brussels - the epicentre for European antitrust enforcement. But Martínez-Lage stayed the course in Madrid, a bet that paid off handsomely as the national competition agencies became increasingly active and the Brussels market was flooded with competitors. By the mid 1990s, Martínez-Lage was a leader in the Spanish competition field.

But as the new century approached, more and more firms in Spain began to offer competition advice. Martínez-Lage's boutique structure meant it wasn't fed the steady stream of transactional work that competitors with thriving corporate departments enjoyed. Nor did the firm benefit from an expansive international network, which could refer clients from all over the world. Martínez-Lage seemed to be in danger of losing its pre-eminent position in the market, yet it was reluctant to merge with a competitor. In 2006, Jaime Pérez-Bustamante added fuel to the fire, departing Martínez-Lage after 17 years to establish the competition group at Linklaters LLP.

Finally, after more than two decades as an independent firm, Martínez-Lage joined forces with Howrey in 2008. "We wanted to take the boutique structure and apply it to a larger organisation," the firm said. It was a timely merger, coinciding with the introduction of a new competition law in Spain, which spawned a new agency and a raft of new antitrust matters for the private bar.

But with the demise of Howrey, the team is returning to its independent roots as a competition and EU law boutique. The new firm name recognises all three partners: Martínez-Lage, Rafael Allendesalazar and Helmut Brokelmann. All three are nominated to The International Who's Who of Competition Lawyers and Economists. They are supported by five associates.

"Howrey didn't fail because its lawyers lacked talent," said one local rival. "They're a very strong team. Yet I wonder whether they'll now be back to same position they were in before the Howrey merger."

But the firm is celebrating its independence. It says it has recovered the flexibility to work closely with clients, which can be more difficult in a larger structure. "We're not driven by billable hours and can afford to have heavy partner involvement in a case, which clients appreciate," says Martínez-Lage.

Three years with Howrey has also provided valuable experience working with excellent lawyers in the US and Europe. "We keep in contact [with former colleagues] and will have the opportunity to work together in the future," Brokelmann tells GCR. "There are actually ongoing cases in which we already work together." The firm is also maintaining a best friends network; it will have far fewer conflicts of issues without the international Howrey ties, and so can pick up a greater number of referrals.

The firm has ambitious plans to corner a new market for antitrust enforcement in Spain. "Based on our litigation experience in both follow-on damages actions and stand-alone actions before the civil and commercial courts it is our intention to further develop the area of private enforcement," says Brokelmann.

The area could be ripe for growth, but most practitioners say it has yet to take off in Spain. "We all had high hopes for private enforcement, but it has not materialised yet," says Miguel Odriozola, head of the competition team at Clifford Chance LLP in Madrid.

Whatever the future for private enforcement, the new firm is optimistic about its prospects. "We look forward to continue serving our clients with full dedication and more proximity," says Brokelmann.

With a client roster that includes France Télécom, Buena Vista, The Walt Disney Company, Wella and Pavasal, the team is certainly off to a running start.

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