

## **Official appeal of 25 editorial and non-editorial leaders from the Romanian newsrooms of the Ringier AG media company,**

To the executive management of Ringier AG and to the Ringier Board of Directors and the Ringier Group Executive Board,

For the preservation of editorial independence from commercial, correct information of the public and equal treatment of persons and companies in news and investigations, regardless of whether they spend advertising budgets or not.

We, the 25 names signing this letter, are representatives of two important Eastern European newsrooms, Gazeta Sporturilor and Libertatea. We are part of two economically and journalistically successful, globally recognised newsrooms, part of a robust international media company. And we want to work together with our management for the future of the company, which is why we ask you to consider with balance and confidence the points stated below.

On 31st July and 8th August 2023, three people from Ringier Sport Management, the sports press division of the Ringier Group, asked an editorial manager of Gazeta Sporturilor to introduce a new way of working. The new rules would require the newsroom to show articles to international management before publication. The request, made in two separate discussions, would apply to articles about betting companies which are or could be advertising partners. The editorial manager refused.

This episode is only the latest in a series of developments over the past 12 months. During this period, some Ringier executives have expressed their dissatisfaction with the fact that we, the GSP and Libertatea newsrooms, continue to practice the separation between editorial and commercial. We are being asked to introduce new procedures, on the grounds that what we do is "old style journalism".

But separating editorial from commercial is a key principle in journalism. It applies to the biggest and most respected newsrooms in the world. Once changed, this rule would lead to a situation where certain people and companies are privileged over other companies and over the readers.

We firmly believe that these initiatives are not approved by Ringier AG. Furthermore, we know that there are many people in Ringier's management and on its Boards who have a proven commitment to freedom of expression. That is why the purpose of this appeal is to point out to all these stakeholders, regardless of their beliefs, the risk that concerns us all.

Because, sadly, the episodes of the last year tell us that this was not an isolated incident, but possibly a new way of working. This one would be against our principles and against the way these newsrooms have operated on their way to journalistic relevance and economic performance. Here are few other episodes:

On 20 October 2022, in an email exchange involving Ringier Romania and Ringier's sports group, there was a discussion on the relationship between editorial and commercial.

The editorial heads claimed that "The separation between commercial and editorial is 100% respected in our newsroom". A person from Ringier Sport Management replied that "Well, I see a big problem

with this. Actually, we work very close in (a name of a country where Ringier has media assets) and we see better results that way".

The editorial managers of the Gazeta Sporturilor refused to change the current independent way of working.

They have written and pointed out that the lack of journalistic independence in the face of the commercial is contrary not only to the Romanian law but also to the clearly stipulated rules of the Ringier company. In the "Independence" chapter of the Ringier Code of Conduct and Editorial Mission Statement it is stated: "Our journalists are steadfast in the face of influence from individuals, companies and authorities".

Same type of pressure have been noticed as well at Libertatea, the Ringier's other daily publication in Romania.

On September 1, 2022, a person from the Ringier Board of Directors, who also holds the position of head of the Board of Directors in a real estate company that the newspaper had written about, addressed an accusatory email to the author of the article, the reporter Iulia Marin. The media company official added in the CC some of the shareholders and heads of the Ringier company and the shareholders of the real estate company. The editorial staff saw this as pressure against the editorial.

After the exchange of emails described above, it was proposed to change the way of working at Libertatea in the sense of the validation of the articles by the management. After some discussions in Romania, it was agreed that it would be against the independence rules. Norms have been drafted so that collaboration is done optimally without someone outside the newsroom seeing, reading or validating the articles.

In August 2023, there was the episode mentioned at the beginning of this appeal, against the independence of journalists in the newsroom of Gazeta Sporturilor.

If, absurdly, newsrooms were subject to requests for changes and approval of articles from outside the newsrooms, this would mean censorship according to the definition of Romanian law and also to the jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights.

We do not believe that anyone has a mandate to change the rules under which this huge press company has been operating for almost 200 years, and the journalism itself for even longer.

It is precisely the real loyalty to Ringier that makes us point out that the organisational, human, legal and economic risks are very high if it continues along this path. And we give you just one example.

If newsrooms were to agree to privilege certain companies based on advertising money spent, the group could be sued by a company that does not spend advertising money and rightly say that it has been discriminated against in the news. Any entity, whether we are talking about companies, governments or individuals, will want to see where the "price list" is and where the fee for "preferential treatment" is.

The principles of equal treatment are also clearly stated in Ringier's internal documents: "The acceptance of benefits as consideration for preferential treatment - is prohibited", both for the Ringier company itself and for employees, says Chapter 7 "Bribery and corruption" of the Ringier Code of Conduct.

As employees, we are ready to actively and extensively discuss collaboration and business improvement based on mutual respect.

We are ready to work, as we have done in the past, for a highly profitable company as a strong foundation of journalistic independence. We also insist that the separation of editorial from commercial does not mean lack of collaboration, but collaboration with well-established principles and rules.

As recognized professionals in the market, with a track record and reputation built over decades of working for leading media companies, we insist that we want to work together with you in a company that supports ethical journalism, not commercially or politically subordinated journalism.

No definitive harm has been done. At the moment, at least in the case of Libertatea and Gazeta Sporturilor, the way of working has remained unchanged, independence is working and no damage has been caused to external partners.

But the pressure on the newsrooms cannot continue. Not us, but the journalistic legacy of Ringier demands it.