

MONDAY WITH MAX DU PREEZ

Corrections, retractions and apology to Ivor Ichikowitz and Paramount Group

On 19 June and 23 June 2023 Vrye Weekblad published two pieces by Max du Preez on the activities and actions of the international arms manufacturer Ivor Ichikowitz and his company, the Paramount Group, which is a regulated defence manufacturer in South Africa and in other countries of the world.

Ichikowitz and Paramount were not contacted before the publication of the first piece, but they issued a statement that was published in full in the second piece, with further comment.

Ichikowitz and Paramount were not satisfied and referred the matter to the Press Council, of which Vrye Weekblad is a member.

The Deputy Press Ombud, Franz Krüger, ruled that some corrections be published.

One such correction was that Ichikowitz's grandparents had emigrated from Lithuania to South Africa, and not his parents, as Vrye Weekblad stated. We apologise for a bona fide mistake.

In the second piece, Vrye Weekblad already admitted that it had no documentary proof that a company in Russia bearing the same name “Paramount”, specializing in imports and exports, was linked to Ichikowitz’s Paramount Group. Ichikowitz and Paramount have denied any link between themselves and the company in Russia. We hereby reaffirm that we have no proof of any association between the entities. It was thus an error to report that Paramount specializes in imports and exports to Russia. We apologize and correct the error.

The Deputy Press Ombud also instructed Vrye Weekblad to correct the impression that Paramount sells Russian Mi-type helicopters in the United Arab Emirates and to make it clear that the company only sells “*helicopter solutions*”, parts and servicing, regarding these helicopters.

He further instructed Vrye Weekblad to correct and apologise for the statement that Ichikowitz is a “*confidant*” of Vladimir Putin. Vrye Weekblad should also reflect Paramount’s denial that it collaborated with Russia on the Barys 8 vehicle which is an armoured vehicle produced in Kazakhstan with no links to Russia.

We hereby do so.

But Ichikowitz and Paramount were unhappy with the Deputy Press Ombud’s dismissal of other aspects of the complaint and took the matter to the Appeals Panel of the Press Council, chaired by retired judge Bernard Ngoepe.

The Appeals Panel ordered Vrye Weekblad to publish several further retractions and apologies.

In the first piece, it was stated: “*Yesterday, speculation was that it might have been weaponry from the Paramount Group that was loaded onto the Russian cargo ship Lady R in December at Simon’s Town Naval Base.*”

Paramount’s denial about the Lady R was published in the second piece.

The judge and his panel rejected Vrye Weekblad's argument that it had made it clear in the sentence in question that it was "speculation", further supported by the words "it might have". "Speculation should be verified in some way," the panel declared.

Vrye Weekblad therefore apologises and retracts the statement.

Vrye Weekblad referred to previously published sources reporting that there was a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between Paramount and the government of Saudi Arabia to manufacture arms in and for sale in Saudi Arabia.

Paramount did not contest the contents of the MOU but stated that no arms were sold in the end.

The Appeals Panel rejected Vrye Weekblad's position that the stated aim to sell the arms manufactured in Saudi Arabia meant that it was reasonable to conclude that trade did or could take place; actually, that the clear intent was what was important.

The panel stated: "*There was no evidence that indeed pursuant to the MOU, the arms were manufactured and sold to Saudi Arabia. A statement to that effect was too huge a jump from the mere existence of the MOU. There is a big difference between planning to produce arms in the future, and actually selling them (in Saudi Arabia) as alleged.*"

The panel found that Vrye Weekblad had breached Articles 1.1 and 1.2 of the Press Code and ordered the publication to retract the statement and apologize, which we hereby do.

In the second piece, Vrye Weekblad wrote about Ichikowitz: "*Through his company Trans Africa Capital, he is also co-owner of a large gold mine which, according to critics of Putin, helps fund the war in Ukraine.*"

Ichikowitz objected to the suggestion that it helped fund the Russian war in Ukraine.

The Appeals Panel found that the argument was overstated, thus in breach of articles 1.1 and 1.2.

We apologise and retract the “overstatement” attributed to “Putin critics”.

On the issue of the gold mine, Du Preez’s piece stated: “According to my information, Ichikowitz was recommended as a shareholder by Zuma, who appears in photos taken at the signing of the agreement.”

In his presentation to the Appeals Panel, Ichikowitz denied that he was recommended by former president Jacob Zuma. It was the South African government, not Zuma, he says.

The panel stated: “The respondent’s argument that Zuma and the government are one thing is seriously flawed. It is based on the wrong assumption that Zuma the President could never act in his personal capacity as an individual.”

We thus apologise and retract the statement.

The panel rejected Vrye Weekblad’s explanations why it did not ask Ichikowitz and Paramount for its reaction before the publication of the first piece. The panel stated: “We believe that had the appellants been given the right to reply, the original article could have been quite different; in any case, the reader would at least have had both versions and decided for themselves. It is not sufficient that the reply was published four days later.”

We stand corrected and apologise.

[Read the Appeals Panel’s finding here.](#)