

# Successful road to the top

Winston Norman

**As a dedicated, dynamic and highly motivated professional combining over 10 years' manager and director level experience in property and asset management, and with a proven track record of achieving demanding operational and financial objectives, it comes as no surprise that Granit Polus Group's Simona Ioana Ion is now leading the company as its Head of International Investments.**

**G**ranit Polus Group is a fully integrated real estate development and management business, established almost 25 years ago. In the last two decades, the group has built a reputation for delivering major, highly successful retail, office and residential as well as sport & leisure projects across eleven countries. Nowadays the company owns a substantial real estate portfolio in Hungary, Romania, Croatia, Slovenia and Russia.

Ioana's journey to the top of a successful international development company has been swift but not unexpected. She joined Granit Polus Group in 2012 as Head of Commercialisation responsible for introducing best practice and cross border opportunities.

According to Ioana, her success is only a part of the story. She emphasises the importance of synergy and team work as major contributing factors. "Since 2012,

when I joined the group, we shared a great deal of extraordinary experiences, achievements and accomplishments, but all these are not only mine, this business is a "team sport"; it is not about one person, success is best if it is shared," she explained.

"Skills and departments meet and connect, there is an interdependence and synergies occur between the composing elements, people and actions, to contribute to the business success," she continued. "I shared countless great moments and achievements with the local teams at that time in Croatia, Poland, Russia, Slovakia, later Bulgaria, Armenia, Georgia, Romania still, and of course the HQ team that pervades the rhythm."

One of her most spectacular results was achieved in her home country as the mall director of the Romanian shopping mall she re-energized, Atrium Mall in Arad, which was acquired by the group in au-



Simona Ioana Ion

Atrium Mall



turn 2013 and that Ioana has overseen since the takeover.

"I got the accountability of managing and turning it around to align it to the market standards," Ioana commented. "The challenge was rewarding as from the process of building up a team for that asset, we got to the process of re-branding the mall, one year later undertaking a refurbishment phase – leasing wise – and this year we have been awarded the Best Refurbished Regional Retail Project of the Year, part of the SEE Real Estate Awards. Also, we are now enjoying the status of the leading scheme on the market, with a great performance."

Ioana describes Atrium as a "cathedral of consumption." She explained, "It is not a place or a platform, but a product, and in the role of managing it, we need to deliver an exceptional experience. The key task is



Atrium Mall

to see and feel how the current shifts are moving, to learn from the new impression and manage to put them in action, to keep the welcome attitude and create the best journey for all parties involved."

She continued, "Atrium is an organic business, it has changed at a very fast pace lately, a lot happens on the stage and behind the scenes every day, and this is what gives the team a huge role to play."

The success story of Atrium Mall includes the successful rebranding and redesigning of the shopping centre, which, according to Ioana, radically changed its visual identity and refreshed the town's image. The overall footfall has increased by 30 percent over the past five years. Throughout this project, Granit Polus demonstrated its talent and professional expertise in how to turn around a distressed asset in the best possible way.

"Since the handover of the shopping centre, the rental level has increased by 25 percent, the team has achieved a 50 percent higher NOI level, and the occupancy level reached 96.7 percent. Also, the centre has an impressive number of new tenants, both local and international brands," she added.

As the firm's new Head of International Investments Ioana focuses on the delivery of exceptional service, and implements effective business development strategies to drive revenue and support long-term growth. A natural leader and manager who motivates, supports and develops personnel to their maximise potential,

Ioana has the interpersonal and communication skills to build positive relationships with all parties. Her positive and proactive approach, driven by continuous improvement, has helped her develop into a creative problem solver, who excels with increased responsibilities.

In a male dominated sector Simona Ioana Ion's rise to the top of a successful development company is nothing short of eye-opening. She remarks that she primarily sees herself as a person acting on behalf and in the interests of the business she represents, with no emphasis on the sexes.

"I do not believe in the mythical 'glass ceiling', just do your best and there is always a way. Both women and men in business share a drive to be curious and interested, we all have our talents, we work hard, have a plan, communicate authentically, we are open to take risks, have passion and prepare ourselves to meet the moments of opportunity on our paths," she said.

Describing the main challenges in her new position, Ioana said, "Undoubtedly challenges are present in every position, triggered by both internal and external factors, to say – from the striving of performing better to a possible uncontrollable business environment. I work and think outside the box to navigate the journey in the view of the fast-moving nature of my work, and with passion and determination, challenges are minimized and overcome. One has to be aware that on the way of

one's vision there are obstacles, challenges, unexpected turns you need to learn to give and take."

"I've had the chance to meet amazing people, to be part of remarkable projects, reach our targets and gain the success we wanted and we move on with the story, with the same strength, if not with even more prominence," she added.

Ioana is also a young mother. How does she combine her family life and professional duties? "Both as a professional and a parent I saw the need for creating a toolbox to manage different encounters, opportunities and projects life presents me with," she commented. "As a mother, having a child is a learning curve, there are lots of tools I can pick from to better equip myself to support challenges in the everyday life. As a professional, my manifesto is to be fully engaged with my work, to be motivated to find new realms to overcome. They interchange continuously and bring added value reciprocally. At home I apply managerial skills, to mention just that I surrounded myself with a great team to help; at work, I apply the patience to listen and reiterate, to say at least."

Another aspect of her busy schedule, which is quite remarkable, is her commuting from Romania to Hungary. "Commuting is part of the sequence of activities I undergo and I integrate it tactically in my schedule, on the one hand so that I can be there where the business requires and, on the other hand, to be part of the major events and spend a sensible amount of time with my daughter," she explained.

With all this in place Granit Polus Group is positioned as a dominant Central-European real estate developer and real estate manager. With Ioana at the helm the company intends to maximize returns on invested capital and further enhance its reputation through the selective development of quality projects.

"To accomplish these goals, the group intends to implement the following 'Key Pillars' of strategic initiatives: Focus on high-growth real estate projects. Continue to capitalise on Granit Polus Group's 'know-how' and market experience. Optimise its highly influential network. Form alliances with strong financial and strategic partners as well as acquiring local knowledge and human resources, and establish strong cooperation agreements with regional construction companies and complimentary businesses," she concluded. ■