

Exiled Belarus Founders Warn of Global Crackdown on Innovators

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KEYWORDS: Startups, politics.

The critical thinking, international connectivity, and system-building mindset that make entrepreneurs so valuable can also make them targets of authoritarian regimes.

In April 2021, masked men stormed Imaguru, Belarus's flagship startup hub, arresting attendees of a business metrics workshop. Later on, the organization that had spent eight years building a thriving innovation ecosystem was branded an "extremist organization" and, as Imaguru's founders, we were sentenced in absentia to collectively 23 years in prison. We now operate Imaguru from Madrid and Warsaw.

What happened to our company wasn't collateral damage from political upheaval. It was the deliberate targeting of an entire economic sector that authoritarian regimes increasingly view as an existential threat.

TechCrunch's Mike Butcher captured the international shock when he wrote about Belarus's [systematic dismantling of its tech sector](https://techcrunch.com/2025/05/01/branded-extremists-for-building-startups-belarusian-tech-pioneers-face-a-stateless-life-in-exile/) (<https://techcrunch.com/2025/05/01/branded-extremists-for-building-startups-belarusian-tech-pioneers-face-a-stateless-life-in-exile/>), noting how entrepreneurs who had once been celebrated as economic heroes suddenly found themselves political enemies. The #SavePandaDoc campaign he highlighted became a rallying cry for a global tech community watching in disbelief as a government devoured its own innovation engine.

But for entrepreneurs, investors, and policymakers worldwide, Belarus isn't just a cautionary tale — it's a preview of challenges already emerging in other markets.

The Entrepreneurial Threat Paradox

The Belarus case reveals a fundamental contradiction in how authoritarian systems view innovation. Governments initially celebrate tech entrepreneurs as engines of economic growth, offering tax incentives and international showcases. Belarus promoted its "IT country" brand globally, pointing to successes like MSQRD's acquisition by Facebook and unicorn companies like FLO Health and PandaDoc.

Yet the same qualities that make entrepreneurs valuable — critical thinking, international connectivity, system-building mindset — eventually make them dangerous to authoritarian control. Our research tracking 220+ Belarusian startups through the crisis found that 41.5% of founders participated in pro-democracy activities. They weren't political activists by training; they were problem-solvers who saw systemic issues and tried to fix them.

This creates what we might call the "entrepreneurial threat paradox." Authoritarian governments need innovation for economic legitimacy but fear innovators for political reasons. Belarus chose repression over economics, with devastating results.

The Numbers Don't Lie

The economic destruction was swift and massive. Within 12 months after the political crisis started in Belarus in 2020, 58% of startup founders relocated internationally. At least 40 companies were removed from Belarus's special economic zone. Investment flows to Belarus-registered entities collapsed as international investors fled.

But here's the counterintuitive finding: The displaced entrepreneurs didn't just survive — they thrived. Relocated startups raised three times more capital in their first year abroad than they had previously.



Companies that relocated to EU countries maintained 87% of their international investor relationships, and 45.7% found new fundraising opportunities.

This data suggests that entrepreneurial talent, once displaced, often performs better in more supportive environments. For receiving countries, this represents a massive opportunity. For origin countries, it's an economic catastrophe that can take decades to recover from.

The Global Pattern Emerges

Belarus wasn't unique. Similar dynamics are playing out in Hong Kong, Myanmar, Afghanistan, and other contexts where governments are moving from celebrating to constraining their tech sectors. The pattern is clear: As authoritarian systems face pressure, they increasingly view innovation communities as vectors for democratic values and international connectivity.

This creates new risks for entrepreneurs operating in politically unstable environments and new opportunities for countries smart enough to attract displaced talent. Estonia's expanded e-Residency program, Lithuania's startup visas, and Poland's Business Harbour initiative all capitalized on Belarus's loss.

Policy Blind Spots

Yet most democratic governments remain unprepared for entrepreneurial displacement at scale. Current immigration systems treat all post-Soviet nationals as potential security risks, creating barriers for democracy advocates fleeing authoritarian targeting. Banking regulations designed to prevent money laundering become obstacles for legitimate entrepreneurs trying to establish businesses.

Perhaps most perversely, sanctions designed to pressure authoritarian regimes often harm the very people they should protect. Our 2023 research found that 86% of displaced Belarusian entrepreneurs faced banking difficulties abroad, with many reporting discrimination based on Slavic surnames.

Building Antifragile Ecosystems

The Belarus experience offers crucial lessons for building innovation ecosystems that can survive political upheaval:

- First, geographic concentration creates vulnerabilities. The traditional Silicon Valley model of clustering everything in one location works until that location becomes politically hostile. Distributed, internationally connected networks prove more resilient.
- Second, early internationalization isn't just good business strategy — it's political insurance. Startups that had already established foreign entities and investor relationships survived the crisis better than those purely domestic.
- Third, the venture capital industry needs new frameworks for evaluating political risk. Investors who can quickly assess and fund relocated companies access a pipeline of crisis-tested entrepreneurs that competitors miss.

The Opportunity Ahead

For policymakers, the lesson is clear: countries that move quickly to attract entrepreneurial refugees build lasting competitive advantages. These aren't traditional economic migrants — they're skilled innovators who create jobs rather than take them.

For entrepreneurs, the Belarus case demonstrates the importance of building political resilience into business models from day one. This means diversifying legal structures, maintaining international relationships, and preparing for scenarios where home governments become hostile.

For investors, displaced entrepreneurs often represent better opportunities than those operating in stable environments. Companies that survive political targeting have proven their adaptability and resilience in ways most startups never will.

Belarus showed the world how quickly an innovation ecosystem can be destroyed. Now it's up to democratic societies to prove they can build something better from the pieces — and to do it before the next wave of entrepreneurial displacement arrives.

The question isn't whether more governments will turn on their innovation sectors. It's whether the rest of us will be ready when they do.