

Learning from the entrepreneurial icebreakers

This article shares the insights of "entrepreneurial icebreakers" — business pioneers who launched private companies in Central and Eastern Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

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Ivo Boscarol had a passion for flying and dreamed of being able to fly as he wished. Unfortunately, Slovenia, where he lived, was part of what was then Communist Yugoslavia, and airspace, like everything else, was tightly controlled. But that didn't stop him. He and some other pilots secretly flew in motorized hang gliders from Italy so he could work on devising his own models. Not satisfied by what he saw on the market, he decided he wanted to become his own private aircraft producer.

When he first approached the country's aviation authorities to obtain the necessary permits, he was met with bemused derision. Not only could no one fathom his proposal but no one had any expertise on hang gliders or light aircraft. When the authorities consulted state officials for advice, they were told the best person to speak to on the subject was none other than Ivo Boscarol himself. After endless meetings and reams of red tape, they finally relented, granting him permission to produce small aircraft.

However, this wasn't the end of Boscarol's troubles. There was a complete absence of systems, exams and regulations for anyone wanting to manufacture their own light aircraft. Refusing to buckle, Boscarol proposed that he himself would write the exam – the same exam that he would later be required to pass. Permission was granted and over the following years Boscarol would go on to write many of the regulations and requirements for manufacturing ultralight aircraft in his country. He also eventually achieved his desire: He and his company,

Pipistrel, became the first Yugoslavian private aircraft manufacturer – and also became successful internationally. To date, the company has won three NASA Challenges, a feat no other company has matched.

Though Boscarol's story is rare, it is far from unique. He is one of thousands of unsung heroes of entrepreneurship who were able to overcome what at the time seemed like insurmountable obstacles to launch companies during Central and Eastern Europe's (CEE) bumpy transition from Communism to Capitalism, commencing with the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 and continuing throughout the next decade.

We collaborated with 18 other entrepreneurship professors from across Central and Eastern Europe in an extensive research project lasting four years (details listed at end of article). Our research yielded important insights and 15 case studies on a special breed of entrepreneur, whom we document in our new book, *Entrepreneurial Icebreakers*. The title is an apt description of business people who, like the ships they are named after, move and navigate in conditions where others cannot, breaking through obstacles in their path. This is an invaluable capability to have in transition economies.

Western economies have long been the focus of entrepreneurial research. But these economies generally boast strong regulatory and political frameworks, and their markets are developed and fairly homogenous. This stands in stark contrast to the distinct reality of many other countries where standards and rules are weak or nonexistent, regulation is evolving and business ecosystems are fragile. What are the discoveries of entrepreneurial research for them?

This article shares the insights of entrepreneurial icebreakers. In documenting the obstacles they had to cut through to get to where they are today, we show the path to break inflexible, outdated structures by introducing new dynamics, redefining value creation and changing mind-sets.

Their insights are especially relevant to anyone launching a business in a transition economy where the entrepreneurial opportunities and growth prospects may be greater than in mature markets – but only if one learns how to operate like an entrepreneurial icebreaker.

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