The Belarusian It Industry Continues To Provide Hope For The Country's Future, According To New UCL Research Led By Professor Andrew Wilson

Thursday 6 July, 2023

The study, Belarus Digital Brain Drain - an Industry in Exile, published in the Centre for European Policy Analysis Journal,

discusses the development of the Belarusian IT community and how it accelerated the anti-authoritarian revolution of 2020 and the subsequent pro-democracy movement.

From crowd-funded platforms to sophisticated digital solutions for documenting election rigging, IT facilitated growing unrest. As the regime cracked down on this rebellion, digital solutions emerged to coordinate protests and strikes. Through special chatbots in the Telegram messenger app, it was possible to automatically inform human rights activists about one's detention, for instance. Software was created to deanonymise the Belarusian security officers carrying out brutal assaults.

All protest leaders and activists were arrested or forced to flee the country. Independent media was banned. Some 45,000 people were imprisoned. The repression did not spare the IT community, which became public enemy number one in the eyes of the Lukashenko regime. And yet, the IT sector has continued acting as a diaspora to support the emergence of a democratic Belarus.

Initiated by an IT company founded in Belarus and written by Belarusian academic Tadeusz Giczan, the paper outlines the role of the sector in supporting democracy, the defeat of the revolution and the beginning of a mass exodus of IT professionals from Belarus, which accelerated significantly after the outbreak of war in Ukraine, creating the phenomenon of the Belarusian IT sector in exile.

The research has been sponsored by an international tech company of Belarusian origin who are keen to shine a spotlight on events in this part of the world. For the security of their employees who still stay in Belarus, they are unable to be named publicly.

It gives an overview of the two waves of IT emigration (before and after the war), detailing exactly who left and where they went, what impact their departure had on the Belarusian economy, and the situation and prospects of those who left and those who stayed.

Professor Wilson explains: 'For a time in the late 2010s, Belarus became well-known for something other than being the 'last dictatorship in Europe'. Its booming IT industry produced 6.5% of GDP, and produced famous global brands like Wargaming and Viber.

'IT workers were at the forefront of the 2020 protests. They helped devise apps for exposing vote rigging; they coordinated and participated in demonstrations; and hacked the security services to expose their accountability for repression. 'President' Lukashenko (he inaugurated himself after the election) took his revenge. He declared "Tell me, what do the IT people want? I've already created a paradise for them. But no, it turns out they want more."

'Between 5% and 10% of IT workers left Belarus after 2020, another 20% were predicted to do so in 2022. Most went to Poland, where 53,000 had taken up a Poland Business Harbour programme by October 2022. Large numbers went to Lithuania and Latvia. Ukraine, which also has a strong and often Russian-speaking IT industry, was a favourite before February 2022. Many Belarusians were operating 'offshore'.

Professor Wilson adds that now, the sector gives hope for Belarus. 'If Russia was defeated in Ukraine, Lukashenko would most likely fall too, and they could head back home,' he explains. 'Despite being in exile, many Belarusian IT specialists continued to work online for a post-Lukashenko Belarus. The dynamism that had benefited Belarus was dispersed, not destroyed. It was now benefiting Belarus's Western neighbours, the global economy, and a hoped-for digital transformation of Ukraine under post-war reconstruction.'

The paper was presented at the 8th annual Belarus Studies in the 21st Century conference in April, which was hosted by the UCL School of Slavonic and East European Studies, the Ostrogorski Centre and the Francis Skaryna Belarusian Library and Museum. It was followed by a live streamed Q&A

Related Sectors:

Business & Finance :: Consumer Technology :: Government ::

Related Keywords:

Belarus :: IT Brain Drain :: Lukashenko :: IT Industry :: Ukraine Invasion :: UCL School Of Slavonic And East European Studies ::

Scan Me:

session.

Attendees also attended a reception at UCL and had a tour of the Francis Skaryna Belarusian Library and Museum Church.

Professor Wilson is author of Belarus: The Last European Dictatorship. His latest book Ukraine Crisis: What the West Needs to Know was published by Yale in October last year.

-END-

Links:

Paper and foreword in full here

Professor Wilson's academic profile

UCL School of Slavonic and East European Studies

Company Contact:

_

Full Fat

T. 02071839525
E. info@wearefullfat.com
W. https://www.wearefullfat.com/

View Online

Newsroom: Visit our Newsroom for all the latest stories:
https://www.wearefullfat.pressat.co.uk