

“By creating these jobs, I feel I’m settling a debt to my adopted country”

“Building my own IT company set me completely free”

Tudor Ivanov, an engineer by training, didn’t have a franc to his name when he fled Romania in 1990 and landed in Belgium. He came to know unscrupulous employers. Then he discovered Belgium’s IT world. Two years ago, he founded the IT company Pulsar Consulting with a friend.

Tudor Ivanov, 38, was born in Bucharest, the second and youngest son of a family of scientists. His mother is an electronics technician, working at the imposing National Institute of Physics, a research centre bringing together some 30,000 people in the Romanian capital. His father is an even more prominent scientific figure, serving as director of the Institute’s cyclotron. “In Romania, even today and unlike in Belgium it seems to me, your level of education matters enormously and directly shapes your social class. My father was a renowned scientist. We were a family of intellectuals, which guaranteed us an income slightly above average,” he comments. His father’s analytical mind, combined with his strong personality and his standing in the scientific world, would go on to leave their mark on the young boy.

“As a kid I was very impulsive, which had a knack for annoying him. At my local school, for instance, I learned not just to fight, but to run a gang. I’d post my little scouts on street corners to watch for attacks – with stones or sticks – from other gangs from other neighbourhoods. A curious way, no doubt, of discovering a talent for leadership,” he jokes. Because the boy tended to get noticed more for what he did in the schoolyard than for his grades. “It was probably joining the school choir that saved me,” he says. There, a teacher with a national reputation taught him to rework his ego. “I was a leader at school, but increasingly a small-time mafia boss. In a choir, you’re in a group of forty, and every newcomer wants to be told they have the most beautiful voice. Then you understand what makes a group strong, you develop a sense of solidarity toward a partner whose voice falters. That’s fundamental. And it proved essential later on, when I had to redevelop my ability to lead people for my professional life. I believe very strongly in Hegelian dialectics,” he continues.



Tudor Ivanov: “In IT, we were ten years behind the West. But the Romanian is a tinkerer at heart, given the lack of spare parts. Where we’re from, for instance, every woman driver knows that if the fan belt goes, a garter belt will do the job.” © Jan Locus

“If I wanted to make something of myself, I was better off betting on my other skills: IT and telecommunications.”

Learning on the Black Market

At Mihai Viteazul secondary school, he chose the maths-and-technology track, along with classes in milling, turning and machine-shop work. His father gritted his teeth; his mother applauded with both hands. "For her, the choice was obvious: I was so boisterous, she used to say, that I could never work eight hours a day behind a desk. My father, on the other hand, I think was somewhat bitter that I wasn't developing the same talents as him. And certainly disappointed not to see me carry on his 'life's work'. As for me, I didn't feel up to it. Overshadowed by his reputation, at times." He pauses, then continues: "It's really only in the last few years that I've truly made peace with my father's image. Because I've been able to achieve my own successes, on my own terms."

IT and the Campus

"I had this passion for technical things. And little by little, electronics became another source of interest. From a very young age, several times a year, my mother would let me tag along to the electronics labs at the National Institute of Physics. As a result, I very quickly started frequenting Bucharest's second-hand markets, hunting for used parts. Sinclair games consoles were all the rage at the time, for instance, and those of us who liked to tinker built our own. I made something of a speciality of it. When it came time to leave the country, it was by reselling several of these consoles that I was able to pay for part of my plane tickets." Under the Romanian dictatorship, provided your parents had the 'good sense' to keep their criticism of the regime to themselves, every child had access to the Republic's universities, subject to passing an entrance exam. Since Tudor Ivanov, an average student, had noticeably improved his results, he made his choice for higher education: the Bucharest Polytechnic Institute, to earn a degree as an engineer in electronics and telecommunications. Not theoretical enough, his father objected. Not active enough, his mother countered. But they backed his choice. "And their conflicting opinions motivated me enormously," the son adds.



Tudor Ivanov: "We wanted to approach IT in a broader way. By owning the entire client relationship end to end. That's what frustrated us most at the time, without a doubt." © Jan Locus

Between 1982 and 1987, the year he graduated, he met his future wife on the university bus - Lumi was studying computer science too. They married the following year, when he was 21. On campus, Tudor Ivanov also discovered an entirely different subject: computing. "That's where I learned Fortran, Pascal, machine language. Electronics remained my passion, of course, but that's where I became convinced that IT - and certainly in telecommunications - would become an indispensable weapon."

A Disillusioned Revolution

Sending out a CV was, back then, an unheard-of practice for any young Romanian graduate, Tudor Ivanov explains: "State officials would present graduates with a list of production sites, and depending on their results, each young engineer could, in turn, choose where to go." So, advised by an uncle active in the sector, Tudor Ivanov, placed favourably on the list, opted for a position as a young engineer responsible for maintenance at the national power-plant construction company. After a year, he moved to its IT department. "Our IT was almost cutting-edge by Romanian standards, and let's say about ten years behind the West. But the Romanian is a tinkerer at heart, given the lack of spare parts. Where we're from, for instance, every woman driver knows that if the fan belt goes, a garter belt will do the job," he adds, laughing. Tudor Ivanov had been with the company for two years when current events upended the young couple's life. Western television would broadcast, in December 1989, images of the old tyrant Nicolae Ceausescu, arms raised on the presidential palace balcony, listening in shock to

the crowd's jeers. When the Romanian revolution got under way, the two IT specialists took to the streets and relieved the Patriotic Guard teams. "After two weeks, I felt the greatest disillusionment of my life," he cuts in. "It was obvious: the old guard was taking over the Revolution for itself. For example, Petre Roman, who was presented to us as a 'young man', we learned was the son of the general to whom we owed the entire security apparatus in the country. We wanted revolution; they wanted the installation of a velvet neo-communism." At night, his phone rang repeatedly, voices threatening him. In a fatherly tone, his employer advised him to tone down his activism. The rumour grew more specific: the new leaders had drawn up a list of activists to monitor, and his name would supposedly be on it. A friend working in telecommunications warned him bluntly: yes, his phone was being tapped.

Better to Leave the Country

"They called it communism with a human face. For my wife and me, it meant the certainty that nothing would change for a long time, while our future and that of our future children seemed to be shut off. Because of the political threats, but also for lack of hope in the future, in August we decided to leave. For good. As three to four hundred thousand young Romanians did within a few years." Taking advantage of a tourist visa, the couple left the country in August 1990, heading first to Prague by plane, before travelling on by train to a cousin who had already been settled in Germany for ten years. All their savings were pooled together: close to 40,000

Belgian francs. "We were very clear-eyed. Through our family we knew the reality of the West. So we were prepared to find ourselves 'sleeping under bridges', as communist counter-propaganda used to put it," he explains. Between the airports of Bucharest and Prague, their luggage was searched. Apart from their train tickets, everything was stolen. By the time the plane landed, they didn't have a single mark left. "My wife supported me in a remarkable way. She's the one who found the words to convince us to carry on," he says. From Germany, the couple decided on Belgium. "A question of language - I'd studied French for eight years at school - and of affinity with the people here," he reports. "Right after the Revolution, we'd met quite a few Belgians active in humanitarian organisations, and I remember being struck by how kind these people were, and by how similar our features were. Perhaps because Belgium is also a meeting point for many different peoples." Their application was filed at the Verviers border post: the couple applied for political asylum. While awaiting a decision on their file, they chose to register with a CPAS (public welfare centre) in the Liège region - to be closer to the German cousin. "I was struck by how kind the officials were," he says.

Every Odd Job Going

But rent still has to be paid. "Within a few months I'd done every odd job imaginable: gardener, woodcutter, mason, electrician, and so on. My wife, who didn't know a word of French when she arrived, landed a small job in a computer shop. Organisations such as Villages Roumains and Carpat Club found us all these student-style odd jobs." Did the couple get through this period without ever wanting to give up? "We would never go back to Romania - it was simply something we had to go through," he answers without hesitation. Tudor Ivanov applies the same logic to his first real contract, landed after answering a small ad in a local newspaper. A small manufacturer of café-style electronic games was looking for an electronics engineer. "If he chose me, he'd commit to applying for my work permit. So it was a trade-off: he paid me 43,000"

...gross francs. I knew perfectly well that wasn't what a Belgian engineer could expect. I knew full well he was exploiting me shamelessly. In the year and a half I spent maintaining electronic dart games or developing new games, he raised my pay just once: my salary went up to 46,000 gross francs. It was a compromise. At the manufacturer, Tudor Ivanov still wondered about the future of the electronics market in the West: "Everything was increasingly being made in Asia. In my view, if I wanted to make something of myself, I was better off betting on my other skills: IT and telecommunications." But the Romanian engineer needed a serious skills refresh. As luck would have it, Forem and Siemens Nixdorf were offering an accelerated training programme for future systems analysts. "At the time, close to 80% of graduates found work. Forem gave me a real gift there: letting me enrol in that programme even though my paperwork still wasn't in order." In parallel, his wife took a similar course, at IBM. His training lasted four months, plus a further five months of work placement. But most placements were based in the Brussels region. To avoid overly costly commutes, he scouted companies in the Liège area. And settled on one name: Star Informatic, active in computer-based mapping. Management knew nothing about the training programme, but agreed anyway. After all, what SME would turn down five months of free work from a future IT professional? "I certainly learned an enormous amount there, and after that unpaid placement, the company offered me a six-month contract, then a second one, and finally an open-ended contract. Star Informatic was a highly cutting-edge technology company, my colleagues were remarkable people, and my salary was entirely in line with the market."

A First Real Contract

Tudor Ivanov worked there on small-project development, before joining, a year and a half later, the team in charge of developing new products. "That's where, in 1993, I started developing a 'Star' software package for computer-based office-space reorganisation. There was competition, sure, but in my view we had the best product on the market." But after another eighteen months of development, the first frustrations set in, he explains: "We had a flagship product, one I'd invested enormously in and identified with. And in my view - as a junior analyst-developer - with some effort on marketing and promotion, we could have made sales take off. For six months, I tried to convince my superiors. But it wasn't part of the company's plans." Since the product couldn't break through, he then wanted to move on himself. "But the company was going through a period of staff cuts. Not the right time, I was told. I felt stuck, and frustrated. As a matter of principle,"

As a matter of principle, before scanning the job market, I felt it essential to send a certain number of internal messages, trying to flag my loss of motivation. I was told to wait three months. Then another three.

"Whenever I go through a period of doubt, I reason with myself by asking how things could possibly be worse than when I first arrived in Belgium."

One evening, flipping through a magazine, I came across an article about Oracle. It was love at first sight - for the company, its business, its size, its financial strength. Three days after I sent in my CV, they got back to me. He joined the world's leading database company in 1995. "Honestly, the challenge was enormous, given the company's reputation, right at the top of the technology world. The name alone opened doors, and the commercial strategy was very strong. But I spent sleepless nights poring over Oracle's products. While I was starting out on client analysis assignments, I had to simultaneously learn my new employer's expertise and understand my client's business" (see the sidebar "Consultancy means staying quiet, listening, and making sure you've really understood everything").

Head of Several Projects

After successfully delivering a first application at UCB Pharma as a consultant analyst, he was offered a Project Manager role for Belgacom's account, one of Oracle's largest portfolios in Belgium. "We had to deliver, in a very tight timeframe - three months - the rollout of new chip cards for payphones. Everything had to be built from scratch, starting with putting together a team. For the first time, I was wearing the hat of a team leader." The project succeeded. As a result, the operator requisitioned him from Oracle to coordinate another project: the computer-managed collection of coins from Belgacom's payphone booths. You can imagine the puzzle: how best to synchronise coin collection by a van driver, factoring in how much faster some booths filled up than others - those near cinemas or schools, for instance - while also accounting for seasonal patterns - a seaside booth in the height of August sees four times more traffic than in February - or the varying average distances between booths, in rural areas versus big cities. "It was above all a lesson in negotiation, in how to manage a budget, a team, and so on. And I also found myself, quite stably, in a strategic position within the country's largest operator." In that respect, his relationship with Michel Goossens, head of technical sales for the Belgacom account at Oracle, proved central. "He's the one who 'placed' me at Belgacom. He's four years younger than me, and he's also an

engineer in electronics and telecommunications. But above all, right from our very first exchange, we hit it off exceptionally well." "Oracle is my company - I work within a business that generates 90% of its revenue from telecommunications. So spotting activities and new opportunities there just seemed like plain business logic to me. Of course, we became friends afterward. But even though I wasn't allowed to share confidential information with him, I felt I had an obligation to my employer to keep my ears open. That relationship between a technical salesperson and a project manager seemed entirely natural to us, even though I know not everyone operated that way."

"Consultancy means staying quiet, listening, and making sure you've really understood everything"

"In IT, it's essential to properly understand the client's logic and that of their business. Consultancy is, above all, about learning to respect three things: staying quiet when the client is speaking to you, listening and writing everything down, then making sure that what you've understood truly matches their expectations," reports Tudor Ivanov. "You know, close to 90% of IT projects fail because the supplier fails to understand the client's needs and expectations." "I'm aware that I sometimes come across to clients as either pedantic or a bit slow, by constantly asking them to repeat their logic and expectations one more time. Let's give ourselves time to understand, rather than charging in headfirst. In that sense, the fact that I'm not a tech geek

certainly helps." Doesn't the 'be fast or be dead' slogan that so many IT gurus like to throw around miss the point, then? "In any case, it's wrong if you take it too literally. Of course you shouldn't miss an opportunity for lack of reaction. But we're not talking in terms of days or seconds either - let's not exaggerate. It's true that things move fast in our industry. But I maintain that before making a decision, I always make a point of weighing the pros and cons. There's always that sound logic of Hegelian dialectics that's worth following closely, if you want to avoid a few nasty failures."

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What If We Tried It Ourselves?

From then on, the 'couple' multiplied their meetings, each finding a benefit in keeping the other informed. "Michel, for instance, would fill me in on internal developments at Oracle," he adds. As their meetings continued, the two men found themselves broaching more sensitive subjects. Like the frustration of watching certain opportunities slip away simply because they fell outside the scope of telecommunications. Or the frustration of depending on other teams' work. "After a few months, almost naturally, we started asking each other: 'What would you have done if you'd had a free budget?' And then we told ourselves that these complaints were a bit too easy. After all, if we were so convinced we could do better than our bosses, why not prove it in practice?" Between 1997 and 1998, the idea of founding a company matured over the course of a year, fed by increasingly specific reflections each time: 'What if you could?'; 'What if you had the budget?'; 'Would you dare?'. "We also wanted to approach IT in a broader way. Today, we're active in three areas: consultancy, custom project delivery, and building tools - that is, developing our own products in-house. By owning the entire client relationship end to end. That's what frustrated us most at the time, without a doubt. Building my own IT company set me completely free." But founding an IT consultancy firm in those times - wasn't that simply taking very convenient advantage of a shortage in the market? "Of course, being active in a booming market encouraged us in our decision. But believe me, our decision was carefully weighed, and we were well aware of the risks we were taking. Michel and I knew the market well. We'd seen consultancy firms go bankrupt within the year. And freelancers in tears, desperate to find a stable employer again," he counters. The final decision was made in the height of summer, on a Sunday morning over a meal, while the two couples' children played together in the

garden. Because it was also decided that the two wives, both active in the IT sector, would join the fledgling team. Tough, tough, in case things went badly. He replies: "I've always told myself that if there was a problem, I'd always find the energy to pick myself back up, even if it meant throwing myself into some completely different line of work. And I'm not saying that to boast. But objectively, when I arrived here, I did everything, all kinds of odd jobs. Whenever I go through a period of doubt in my life, I reason with myself by asking how things could possibly be worse than when I first arrived in Belgium. I spoke poor French, I didn't have a penny, I was out of work, and at any moment we could have been told to leave the country." "It's ultimately quite logical: of course it's hard for me to still feel afraid today. My wife is driven by that same strength." That's no doubt what allows the couple to move quickly on things: the decision to found Pulsar Consulting was made in mid-August 1998, and on the 30th of that same month, notice was given. On 14 October, Tudor Ivanov started being productive within his own company. "In between, we had to explain the birth of our company to our professional contacts, without ruffling the former employer's feathers. For example, through a gentlemen's agreement between the three parties and at Belgacom's request, I stayed on with them." The financial plan has been filed. "We're sticking to it within 10%," Tudor Ivanov states. "We were targeting turnover of 18 million by the end of the first 10 months, and 36 million by the end of the second year. We're currently at around 32 million, with a quarter still to go before closing the year."

No More Room for Hesitation

The succession of hires also followed the established rhythm. Unquestionably, consultancy is the activity that generates revenue fastest. Pulsar therefore began its activities by recruiting and placing freelance IT professionals with a client, under the Pulsar banner, in exchange for a percentage cut. After six months, a first permanent employee was hired. Then a second, up to a fifth this past October. "It's still modest, but entirely within our plans. There are now four of us running the company, alongside our five employees and our six to ten freelancers." Is growth planned for next year? "Obviously. All the more so since we're convinced of the need to promote the commercialisation of products developed in-house. That's already the case with a product designed to manage project management, and we're developing internet software enabling dynamic, generalised management of survey questionnaires. We'll keep hiring." An act one can only assume is far from neutral for a man who has now acquired the nationality of the country that took him in. "Absolutely. By creating these jobs, I'm also paying back part of the debt I owe to Belgium," he says, without boasting. "After all, Belgium took me in, helped me, and for a while I benefited from its social system." And he adds with a smile: "And besides, speaking of employer taxes, I can tell you I pay my debt very generously indeed."

OLIVIER BAUDEN