

Backing early-stage companies in the CEE region, a profile of Presto Ventures

In the ever-growing investment landscape, funds are multiplying and diversifying, and for startups there is more to raising investment than the money and the media moment. With #QVCS Maddyness profiles different funds to give founders and entrepreneurs the information they need to choose the right investor. Today we speak to Přemysl Rubeš, founder and managing partner of Presto Ventures.

Our vision has been the same from day one - to support talented people in reaching their global potential. This is why I founded *Presto Ventures*.

I have been surrounded by extremely talented people for all of my life. I grew up in a community of top musicians and later went to study Math and Engineering in Prague and Paris. I have been a proud nerd and a huge geek. But also a business manager, entrepreneur, and startup CEO.

In 2016, I kicked off my VC career and the Presto story with a boutique venture

fund focused on deep-tech startups and university technology transfer, connecting my background in math with my business experience and network.

With backing from a Czech philanthropist's family office, we focused first on PhDs and scientists. I was totally hands-on with the portfolio companies, working alongside the founders on a daily basis, helping to hand out their business cards and close their first sales. Following the success of the first few companies, we expanded to take a wider approach, focusing on talented founders and mostly B2B startups in the more traditional VC world.

With the first fund, we ended up doing 20 investments, around €15M total, in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and a few others in the Baltics. So, we really raised both the bar and the capital.

Now, we are a team of five partners, and each one of us brings a unique skill set, know-how, and network to the table (an exited founder, a financial analyst prodigy, a corporate CyberSec & BI director and entrepreneur, and a CFO). Each of us also has a little geek and nerd inside, which is really the opposite of the banker-type VC that people are used to. But that also helps us partner with successful tech entrepreneurs, including many other exited startup founders as well as prestigious family offices and institutional investors.

Our current fund has a wider but very clear focus: early-stage B2B SaaS startups from the CEE region. We support more than 40 companies in our Presto portfolio, and we are proud to help founders in any way they need.

Which industries are you working in?

As a VC, focusing solely on early-stage companies in the CEE region comes with a price. We need to be more agnostic and opportunistic to support our deal flow. Our biggest sector is B2B software, but we have also invested in both B2B and B2C marketplaces, B2C SaaS, gaming and esports, HW-enabled SaaS, and crypto/NFTs. Usually, we like tech-heavy enterprise solutions or simple but powerful SME SaaS tools, across all industries.

What do you look for in a founder?

1. We look for founders who can be “presto” - which in our ‘office lingo’ means being quick to think and quick to act. We look for fast learners, as founders need to absorb diverse and complex information quickly and be learning all the time: about the technology, the market, customer needs, trends, competitors, as well as company-building principles, management, hiring, sales, etc.
2. We look for founders who, if you ask them a question, answer in a way

you understand, no matter who you are. That they adjust the answer to the listener, can explain complex concepts in simple terms, don't bother you with details if you expect high-level explanations and vice-versa. In other words, they don't try to teach you what you already know. This is important for sales, management, hiring, raising capital, and more.

3. We look for founders who can convince people, lead them, build trust, and sell their vision. You cannot build a great company without great people. And you cannot have great people on board if you are unable to convince them to work with you and for your vision. This is extremely important, especially in the later stages of the company when the founder will need to hire international, experienced talent. This can be challenging for CEE founders when it comes to hiring Western professionals.
4. Drive, grit, big ambitions. We look for founders who are hungry for success, victory, building a big company, changing the world, and making big money. We look for founders that have the inner motivation to keep everything going... it's both a marathon and a sprint.

There is no shortage of these extraordinary people in the CEE region, and we are certain that more of them will become founders of successful startups.

Can you talk about your current portfolio?

Just to name but a few of our successful companies:

Cloudtalk, a call centre solution provider poised to become Slovakia's first unicorn.

Wolf3D, one of Estonia's fastest-growing startups building a virtual identity platform for games, VR, and metaverse.

Yieldigo is a pricing optimisation platform for online and offline supermarkets around Europe.

IP Fabric is a Prague-based startup building a next-generation IP network infrastructure management solution with customers primarily in the US and Western Europe.

Sharry, a proptech software that empowers the largest real estate projects globally.

Oddin, an AI esports analytics platform that is successfully expanding worldwide.

Inventoro, a SaaS that helps online SMEs with inventory management and

planning, and is an especially important product in today's unreliable global supply chain.

How has COVID-19 changed the way you operate?

No changes really! Building a successful VC firm is a full-life job, so you have to work across time zones, and be online all the time, wherever you are. I think COVID has only accelerated current trends we have seen for a long time in our startup/innovation/VC world. We have been remote-first and invested in companies through Zoom long before COVID. But the ideal scenario is always to be able to meet founders personally for a drink or a beer prior to investment, that's for sure.

What does the future look like? New trends/technologies, changes in the global/local economic landscape?

In recent years, the CEE region has produced several enterprise software success stories thanks to the extensive STEM talent. However, despite the success, the region still faces many challenges limiting its full potential. Investment decisions are slow compared to the US or UK, and there is a scarcity of sales and marketing expertise.

That is changing, and we are seeing an inflow of new VC capital seeking opportunities in new markets. In the current global financial situation, CEE startups are in a very unique position because they have great technological solutions, access to engineering talent, and almost always better capital efficiency than their Western counterparts, achieving more value/growth from each dollar invested.

What makes Presto Ventures different?

We come from the CEE region, and we have been part of the CEE tech community long before becoming investors. That gives us insight into the potential that lies here. We also have first-hand experience with the roadblocks founders are facing, especially in B2B sales and marketing.

We are more personal and founder centric than your average VC funds and, hopefully, more “presto” than them as well. ☐

What one piece of advice would you give founders?

Think about the money you make or raise as if it was the ultimate way to buy back your time - use it to hire people you can delegate from very early on and to simplify tasks in both the company and your personal life. And then use that time for the most valuable work the company needs from you. It starts with product building (at the pre-seed and seed stages), continues with sales and marketing (at the seed and series A stages), and then turns into recruitment/HR/leadership later on.

Přemysl Rubeš is the Founder and Managing Partner of Presto Ventures.

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