



Pathfinder: e-Estonia as the β -version

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Abstract: Estonia is often presented as the leading Digital Governance country globally, but this is not backed up by any of the standard rankings. This essay attempts to answer why this is so, by demonstrating that while the official communications strategy of the Estonian Government emphasizes the country's role as a pathfinder, global media demand, and some of the local protagonists also push, the perfection narrative. This is partially related to the specific historical and geopolitical situation of Estonia, and the subsequent local attitude towards the (Nation) State, which renders (since it is rather unique) the Estonian overall model of only limited use for e-policy transfer.

Keywords: e-Governance, Digital Governance, Digital Transformation, Estonia, State

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1. A cognitive dissonance

Situated South of Finland across the Gulf, East of Sweden, and bordering to its East on Russia (to both of which it belonged for centuries) and to its South on Latvia, is a country of 1.3-million, dominated by the population of a half-million residents in the capital of Tallinn. That means that Estonia has fewer inhabitants (let alone citizens) than the Indian Railway has employees (<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/business/india-business/Indian-Railways-Army-among->

worlds-biggest-employers-Study/articleshow/47853593.cms). Factually, if not legally, a successor state of the Soviet Union, and in many ways the most successful one, it is now part of the European Union, boasting a very liberal economic regime (for instance, a flat income tax), the Euro, and quite some outstanding ranking positions. But it is tech, specifically ICT, that made Estonia globally known in the 2000s: The technological home of Skype (at one time, Europe's only significant Internet platform), Estonia cornered, in the global media's mind, the market for what used to be called e-Government or e-Governance (e-Gov) and what is now mostly referred to as digital(-era) governance (DG). This was accomplished first with paperless cabinet meetings, then with the first truly successful e-elections, and finally with the overall transformation of the country in a digital way. Recent headlines have been:

"Where in the world will you find the most advanced e-Government? Estonia" (Keen, 2018)

"Lessons From The Most Digitally Advanced Country In The World" (High, 2018a)

"Estonia has turned government into a website. Other countries are trying to follow suit. - Estonia has become a tech utopia" (Matthews, 2018)

"Estonia, the Digital Republic. Its government is virtual, borderless, blockchained, and secure" (Heller, 2017)

None of these claims are true, however. Estonia prioritizes DG, and indeed in many respects more strongly than almost any other country, but the hype is exactly that. In not a single one of the generally used, overall DG indicators is Estonia the number one today. However, it is often in the top five, both on the European and the global level.¹ As an Estonian self-analysis puts it, "rankings OK, but not great" (Vaarik, 2015). Another piece in Forbes by IT consultant Peter High is called "An Interview with the Architect of the most digitally savvy Country on Earth" (2018b), and bafflingly in several ways, it is not about Lee Kuan Yew, which one would expect, but about former Estonian President Toomas Hendrik Ilves.

¹ As of September 3, 2018, the day of the keynote. Waseda-IAC at http://iacio.org/pdf/2017_Digital-Government_Ranking_Press_Release.pdf, UN-EGDI at https://publicadministration.un.org/egovkb/Portals/egovkb/Documents/un/2018-Survey/E-Government%20Survey%202018_FINAL%20for%20web.pdf, DESI at <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/desi> (Estonia at http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/newsroom/image/document/2018-20/ee-desi_2018-country-profile_eng_B43FFF58-F3FD-633C-F5833D8295BB9EB0_52221.pdf) and the 2017 EU e-Government Benchmark Report at http://ec.europa.eu/newsroom/dae/document.cfm?doc_id=48587; the Country Report at http://ec.europa.eu/newsroom/dae/document.cfm?doc_id=48586. It is then sometimes claimed that at least Estonia is no. 1 in Digital Public Service Delivery, but currently, that is not the case either, not even in Europe - Finland is currently in the lead again; http://ec.europa.eu/newsroom/dae/document.cfm?doc_id=52244; links with thanks to Keegan McBride. A sometimes-used list of indicators in which Estonia actually is the number one, to the extent that it is still accurate today (Piperl, 2018), seems not directly relevant for DG.

Altogether, Estonia becoming the, rather than a, DG role model has not only been something that has been pushed from the Estonian side; rather, this position was also and perhaps even more so pulled by the global-Western media (Vaarik, i2018; Viik, i2018), which frequently seems to have eased its verification standards. This is perhaps because a digital role-model seemed to be so much needed for the laggard dinosaurs in the old “first world” (“look, it can be done”), possibly because ICT is just the paradigmatic, modern, cool story of our time (Perez, 2002). Maybe the most astonishing example is the much-shared article in the 2017 Christmas *New Yorker* issue by Nathan Heller already cited above. Reading almost like a comped influencer piece, this is just about the only *New Yorker* article I know of that only features people who are profiting financially or politically from the narrative of the story; not a single citizen, critic, or even neutral observer gets a voice (Hartschuh, 2018 is similar but much less prominent).

Actually, Estonia, Estonian DG, and the Estonian digit(al)ization of contemporary life are sometimes really as cool and often almost as real as propagated. It is indeed true that Estonia is counter-ing annoying delays in daily life that seem to still be present from the past in other locales, and just remain propped up by path-dependencies and special interests. Uber is better for normal people (who don’t drive for the company); nobody wants or needs to go to public offices and fill out forms in triplicate; the lives of many people have become internationalized via travel and work; one’s health is better if all doctors that are consulted, or hospitals that are visited, have access to one’s most recent as well as oldest x-rays and test results. Estonia is catering to those needs or at least desires, and this is a substantive success story, not only in Public Relations for Estonia—but for its DG leaders and also for the consumer citizen.

For various reasons, however, this true success story of genuine achievements and their specifics has become overshadowed by the powerful myth of a real-existing digital society and state, and this has obscured the real messages. And that is not solely the international media’s fault. As even the already above-quoted Andrew Keen, one of e-Estonia’s less critical friends, admits:

“All the policy makers and legislators with whom I spoke have, in the best Silicon Valley fashion, drunk the Kool-Aid and loudly proclaim the triumph of their ‘country in a cloud.’ But the truth is less triumphant. The revolution remains a work in progress, and many ordinary Estonians remain indifferent to a lot of these digital abstractions” (2018).

A key Estonian government expert, in a Chathamized seminar discussion this spring in Tallinn, referred to 90% of Estonian DG propaganda as hype and 10% as true; one or two others in the room argued for up to 50% reality and 50% “you know, not lies, but the kind of stuff government people just say.”

In sum, while e-Estonia’s achievements are significant, the numbers do not match the hype. This is both a pity and readily understandable; the goal of this essay is to explain the latter, so as to ease access to the actual successes and failures. The Estonian digital transformation story is very well worth looking at and drawing lessons from, but it is highly specific and context-dependent—just like the one of Singapore, where the basis is in genuine trust of and the qualifications of the civil service in an unparalleled way (Drechsler, 2018a, pp. 32-33). However, it is, on the ground and from the inside, very different from what is being sold and bought abroad.

2. The β -version

The dichotomy of Estonia as *the* e-leader (which it is not) and an e-leader (which it is), however, is not an outside perspective; it has been quite strongly and even sometimes explicitly present within the Estonian discourse of the DG stakeholders for a decade now. Over the years, there has been a shift towards the former; however, since there have been almost universally positive feedback loops, i. e. international observers have “bought” what has been sold, there was also relatively little reason to question this internally, either.

The dichotomy of the two stories has been well theorized in 2015 by Daniel Vaarik in the already cited 2015 analysis called, “Where Stuff Happens First: White Paper on Estonia’s Digital Ideology”; it is still publicly available on the responsible Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communication’s website (Vaarik, 2015). Vaarik, speaker of the Estonian Government under Siim Kallas; former CEO of Hill & Knowlton Estonia; and former Chairman of the Board of PRAXIS, Estonia’s most important public-policy think tank, is an insider’s insider. All of this makes this paper somewhat “official”.

Vaarik differentiates between an “e-Narnia”, a fairy-tale version of e-Estonia, which he regards as a mistake to promote, and “e-Estonia as the beta-model”, which is more believable, truer, and more sustainable (2015); this essay owes its subtitle to the second concept. More detailed key recommendations from the Vaarik white paper include positioning Estonia as a pathfinder (the title of this essay), becoming a DG think tank, and especially, “6. Learn to talk to sceptics. – Sceptics are allies – Involve sceptics in development” (2015; this was done during a recent conference on security problems with the ID cards; <https://www.ria.ee/en/researchers-and-specialists-from-all-over-the-world-will-gather-to-tallinn-for-an-id-card-conference.html>).

As I think that the “Narnia” concept (both in name and as developed by Vaarik), does not adequately describe the alternative to the β -version for the purpose of the current paper, I would propose the following dichotomy table, talking about general fairy tales:

Table 1: *The two e-Estonias*

e-Estonia as a fairy tale	e-Estonia as the β -version
The leading DG country globally	A leading DG country globally
A digital society	Prioritizing a digital society
All public services are only online	Most public services can be accessed online
Role model for the world	Testing e-solutions for the world
Everything is perfect	Mistakes are made
Bureaucracy is abolished	Bureaucracy is largely digitalized
Lots of resources are saved	Some resources are beneficially redirected
(PR is the point of all of this, e-solutions are a positive spillover)	(e-solutions are the point of all of this, PR is a positive spillover)

However, many in Estonia were push-pulled, or jumped, into the fairy-tale version, which was intended as a warning, not as a model (Vaarik, i2018). Also, with exceptions, the β -version is not the official narrative right now either (Vaarik, i2018), although almost all reasonable people (and every single interviewee I broached this subject with) agree that this should be the official story. Just a glance at the website of the best example (or the most obvious instance), for the official marketing of e-Estonia, the e-Estonia showroom (<https://e-estonia.com/showroom/>; also Piperal, 2018), demonstrates that this is not the case and the choice is, indeed, the fairy tale.²

Vaarik, however, was also able to explain how currently embracing the e-Narnia story might be a relatively low-risk strategy: As with Apple or even Facebook, negative news would not harm the narrative, so that the story would not crash (i2018). This may be a reason why so many e-Estonia protagonists embrace it—and most of the key ones know that telling the e-Narnia story means galloping across frozen Lake Constance, even though there are those that truly believe it, as well.

But why take this risk? Why is it so important for so many e-Estonia stakeholders to sell Estonian DG as more than it actually is? It is important to understand that the e-Estonia showroom is, to a considerable extent, not the façade of Estonian DG, but it is the real thing in itself—actual DG is

² The e-Estonia website, although very much part of the e-Narnia set, shows on its homepage a summary of both concepts and does not technically/legally oversell: “We have built a digital society and so can you. – Named ‘the most advanced digital society in the world’ by Wired, ingenious Estonians are pathfinders, who have built an efficient, secure and transparent ecosystem that saves time and money. e-Estonia invites you to follow the digital journey”; <https://e-estonia.com/> [sic]. However, formally this is much more relevant. The Legal Chancellor, who also functions as the national ombudsperson, points out that the Estonian society is not digital, and that in Estonia, there must be the possibility to live non-digitally (Madise i2018) – I underlined in 2014 that the role of the ombudsperson today must be to resist the mindless takeover of ICT without checking conduciveness to basic values first (Drechsler, 2014).

only the back office (see Tikerpe, 2018, who lists the showroom as a DG-accomplishment like the e-residency; generally, Tammpuu & Masso, 2018). It cannot be emphasized enough that there is something there—quite a lot, in fact—but DG solutions seem (by now) to be positive spillovers. Clearly, the point is to increase PR.

One reason might be, as it came out in many discussions, that ICT and specifically DG are quite literally all that Estonia has to show for itself; from moors and elks to low taxes, other nice features seemed not really special enough, and few non-expert non-neighbors could guess where Estonia was on a map before and even after the rise of Skype. Also, while moors and elks are real, Estonian taxes are actually just flat, simple, and thus regressive, but not really that low (Taagepera, 2018, p. 124). In global leadership circles, e-Estonia changed that (or at least added significantly to the market-radical reform image of the mid-1990s). So, by now, Estonians have embraced that fact and use the e-narrative to present themselves internationally, which of course enforces the tendency to say “we are the best”, rather than “we are among the best”. Along with it, ICT has become the central identity element of many Estonians, even perhaps in a wider sense (so Vaarik, 2018 and Riisalo, 2018) than the functional elite that originally came up with the idea. Estonia, to a significant extent, has become e-Estonia.³

This makes it difficult and even risky to challenge the narrative, especially because Estonia perpetually feels to be under an outright existential threat from its erstwhile colonial overlord and Eastern neighbour (Russia). So, being known and thus potentially defended by one’s allies, which is not automatic for tiny Estonia, is therefore truly essential (more about that later). Therefore, e-sceptics are, it is fair to say, sometimes seen as the enemy. The latest e-Estonia institution, Digital Embassies (Kotka et al., 2016), transfers state information into a cloud, servers in Estonian embassies in friendly countries, and commercial clouds, specifically Microsoft Azure (part of their big e-Gov initiative). It is designed so that if Estonia is conquered, it can continue to exist, as it would “preserve the core records of government to allow the country to essentially continue to operate even in the face of physical occupation or destruction. Or, as one advisor put it, ‘we will be the first country in the world that can exist without physical land’” (Leetaru, 2017).

Therefore, the accusation of being a Putinite just for wanting to vote on paper always hangs in the air. Although, as my colleague Robert Krimmer (who was with the OSCE-ODHIR at that time), recalls it was Putin who pushed for e-voting in Europe. When confronted with Finland’s deci-

³ The doyen of Estonian political science and former Presidential candidate Rein Taagepera, in a centennial popular-science volume on Estonian politics (2018), does not mention e-Estonia even once. He sees the specificity of Estonia very traditionally (particularly in its language) and claims Estonia’s “right to survival” is in the fully language-based culture (pp. 11-12). Quite beyond the questions of how valuable another language actually is and of what it means if an entire culture is merely rooted in language, the problem with the language perspective is that it is almost entirely inward-looking—especially in the case of a notoriously difficult, inaccessible one as Estonian. In addition, Taagepera is right to wonder whether Estonian is not increasingly giving way to English, something that e-Estonia naturally propels (pp. 137-138).

sion, in January 2018, to continue keeping their Presidential elections analog, Marten Kaevats, the Government's Digital Advisor, called "the Finnish train of thought 'absurd'. 'There is a working case study that Estonia represents. There is significant research how safe it is, the dynamics and everything. There are numbers to prove it'" (Macdougall, 2018). In fact, while there is indeed plenty of scholarship that is in favor of e-voting, there is as much that speaks against it (Sutcliffe, 2017, which tries to make another point but confirms this one). But why should Estonia mind if Finland, which is better ranked in almost all indicators (not only in DG), decides for itself to stay on in the usual European way?

As former Prime Minister Taavi Rõivas said in an (Estonian-language) op-ed that quite openly pushed further e-Estonia "solutions" for the sake of novelty positioning, "At the beginning of 2018, we are the best in the world as the undisputed e-state. Our success has been based on smart, audacious choices and the intolerable slowness of other countries" (Rõivas, 2018; note that the statements in the first sentence are false). Intolerable for whom? In order to get closer to the answer, we must look at the genesis of Estonian DG.

3. Historical: The Rise of e-Estonia

Although the rise of e-Estonia and Estonian DG is quite linear, and the arsenal of players limited, this history has, amazingly, not yet been written – the first credible attempt (Kattel & Mergel, 2019) is in press with longer treatments that are set to follow.⁴ There are, therefore, also no agreed periodizations yet. Since these, however, are somewhat necessary to make sense of the story, the following is suggested as a working hypothesis that is very much open to corrections.

3.1. Soviet pre-history

The entire development is premised on a long, already Soviet-era history of STEM investment and training especially in Estonia (Högselius, 2005), beginning in the mid-1960s. There was a very high local e-literacy rate just when independence became realistic again, or at least a large reservoir of e-literate people (Velmet, i2018, Põder, i2018, Viik, i2018, Madise, i2018). It is this reservoir of competence that e-Estonia tapped into, but it did not in itself result in any form of e-Gov. It is, however, one key answer to the "why here?" question.

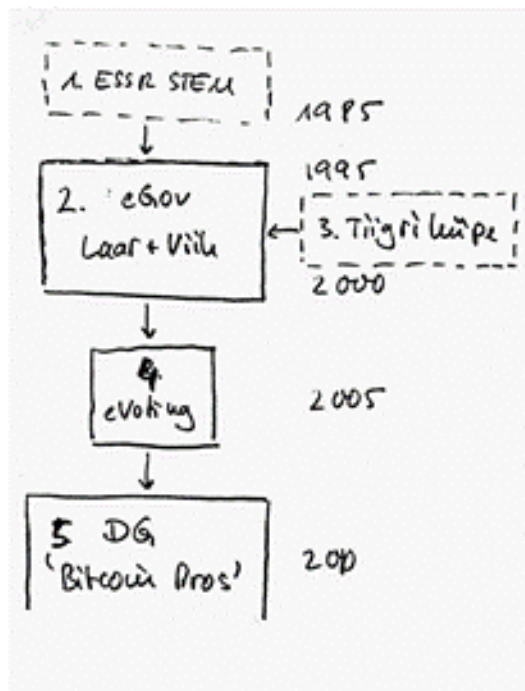
⁴ Intellectual and science historian, Aro Velmet, is "in the early stages of preparing a book-length project on the history of personal data collection and digital governance in Eastern Europe, from the 1960s to the present" (<https://www.history.ox.ac.uk/people/dr-aro-velmet>; Velmet, i2018) which, given his previous work, promises considerable insight. A recently defended, but currently still embargoed and not pre-published Anthropology PhD thesis at Stanford by A. Lorraine Kaljund on "Digitizing Nation-State: Nationalism, Citizenship, and Sovereignty in e-Estonia" might cover some of the same subject matter as well (<https://events.stanford.edu/events/782/78201/>). Ströbele et al. (2017) contains a quite detailed timeline (pp. 6-21) that must, however, be taken with considerable caution, because it often relies on doubtful hearsay and is characterized by a generally quite uncritical approach.

3.2. e-Gov emerges

It was then, in the early to mid-1990s, that the idea to technologically leap ahead via e-Gov, in light of a Soviet legacy that was perceived as unattractive (never mind that in ICT, this was not so). In addition, it was considered at the same time important to do “modernist positioning” in order to develop a more Western look. It is difficult today, to argue against the main interest as being both in state modernization in a constructive way and (perhaps also secondly) in a modernist positioning for PR purposes (Viik, i2018). This, however, soon took, kept, and later expanded to center stage.⁵ However, as a direct and daily participant observer since 1993, I myself have always seen PR in the functional lead (plus the engineers’ drive to do what can be done) and actual reform second, even a positive spillover. Estonia had put its chips on the right number. However, it is too dismissive to say that it unwittingly stumbled upon the truth, but there was an actual effect along these lines. The credit goes primarily to Prime Minister Mart Laar, the father of DG in Estonia, and his visionary e-advisor, Linnar Viik, whom he just let do things and that acted like an independent minister (Viik, i2018; Kattel & Mergel, 2019), especially during the crucial years around 2000; however, we can safely date the beginnings of this to the mid-1990s (August 2000 is the first paperless cabinet meeting and is for many the “big bang” of Estonian DG).

⁵ Nonetheless, Public Administration in Estonia – and that I say as the first PA professor in Estonia since 1938 – had been going extremely strong by then, indeed for almost a decade, so that the argument that Estonia “could not afford a classical bureaucracy” (Viik, i2018 etc., Kristina Kallas in Hartschuh, 2018) seems not valid and post facto to me. DG came to Estonia years after a somewhat hybrid but in many respects very traditional, German-legalistic civil service that had been established (married with some then-fashionable NPM tools which are highly bureaucratic as well; Drechsler, 1997, 1998). There was no reduction in civil service numbers, as in all CEE states except East Germany (Drechsler, 2003). And still today, as anyway, DG does not reduce bureaucracy but digit(al)izes it. And even then, that is only in some respects; in fact, the new Tallinn “Superministry Towers” that just opened look like Kafka’s Schloß reloaded, or in bad light, even like something out of Mordor (<https://news.err.ee/593953/office-building-to-house-four-ministries-nearing-completion>). The much-quoted saving of “over 840 years of time annually, that otherwise would be spent on sending emails or documents and going to state offices” (Piperl, 2018) in bureaucratic work, is an off-the-cuff calculation that assumes maximal time-waste on hypothetical interactions. This is why “Burocrazia addio. Vado a vivere in Estonia” (Stagliano, 2018) is not an option, but since 0-bureaucracy is also not in the least desirable, if we define it as the state in action and/or the potential creation of public value, that is not a bad thing, either.

Table 2: A rough sketch of the history of e-Estonia



3.3. e-literacy

The third, more digital-society-related layer of Estonian DG is that of the “Tiger Leap” program (tiigrihüpe), an overall e-access program for citizens including, importantly, education in schools and later also access for senior citizens. This happened somewhat in parallel with the creation of Estonian e-Gov, for which universal e-literacy was very helpful, perhaps to some extent a *conditio sine qua non*. But without the Laar-Viik e-Government initiative, any spontaneous creation of e-Gov just out of the Tiger Leap would be highly unlikely; a country’s e-literacy and e-Gov are not related in a linear way. This program is often associated with Ministers Toomas-Hendrik Ilves and Jaak Aaviksoo and their education strategies (Kattel & Mergel, 2019), not least especially by the former himself (High, 2018b). Although, this has recently been called into question, and the Tartu State University Sociological Laboratory and the Estonian Academy of Sciences Institute of Cybernetics have been suggested as the true founding locations (Velmet, 2018; see also Maidla, 2018).

3.4. The gap years

A fourth level that remains something of an empty bridge for now, or even as being on a hiatus, emerged around 2005. Then, there was a sense that Estonia had lost the truly innovative e-Gov leadership role, but it was saved when formal and well-working national e-voting (Drechsler & Madise, 2004), which for a time was Estonia’s main DG brand, really came to fruition. In addition, at around that time, the diffusion of e-banking (especially by Hansabank [now Swedbank Estonia]), e-taxation and not least the amazing success of Skype (<https://www.microsoft.com/en->

us/stories/skype/skype-chapter-2-welcome-to-estonia.aspx) had created positive feedback loops for Internet use and access.

3.5. The present

Finally, the fifth and current layer, that of DG, is promoted by a group of new people—and some of the old—who often do not aim for acceptance but dominance of Estonian e-leadership; they see Estonia as e-leading and indeed e-ruling. More than any of the previous generations, they are decoupled from actual problem-solving, but the focus is sometimes (certainly not always) on constructing problems that then can be solved in a good-looking way. We can date this as starting from 2010 or so. To call this a “Nordic” version of California thinking and the Silicon Valley set (Barbrook & Cameron, 1996) gets us close to the mindset. I think Nian Hu’s recent label of “Bitcoin Bro” fits them well enough to understand who and how they are:

“We all know a bitcoin bro. Also called the tech bro or the brogrammer, they can be found trading bitcoin, or some other form of cryptocurrency, and providing regular – and often unsolicited – updates on how much money they’re making. They write long-winded Facebook statuses on entrepreneurship, the power of positivity, and motivation. They idolize Elon Musk, share countless posts about SpaceX, and drool over the prospect of colonizing Mars one day. They love virtual reality, augmented reality, any reality where the Scarlett Johansson-voiced artificial intelligence from ‘Her’ is real. They are constantly forming startups that seek to ‘disrupt’ an industry, or that seek to be ‘like Uber, but for [groceries/toothbrushes/lint rollers]’” (Hu, 2017).

The disruption in our sense is the one of the state, quite in line with the Californian Ideology, also with their 1990s libertarianism (Madise, i2018), which adds to their dismissiveness of the state. For the Bitcoin Bros, easy switching between the first and second sectors has been normal. While business people can also be patriotic, the lack of borders between firms on the one side and the state on the other, in any case, seems to require (outside of Estonia at least) more faith in the private sector than experience (especially in the e-sphere), would allow one to have.⁶

4. Specific: The State of Estonia

The previous discussion shows that even in the diverse context of Europe, Estonia is, while not unique, certainly very specific in regards to the attitude towards the state. This is worth examining, because it, arguably, is part of the foundation of e-Estonia, and also why Estonian-Estonia can argue that acting as or like a startup is okay for a state, although it is bizarrely risky (startups are

⁶ Good recent examples are, e. g., a Nortal article on their own website, promoting Estonian e-ID solutions for Germany of all places (the reason why Germans do not take up e-ID as enthusiastically as Estonians are not related to technology), Lume (2018), which has been promoted unreservedly and undistiguishably from a promotion at <https://e-estonia.com/smartid-authentication-roadblock/>, or a direct link and similar makeup of a lookalike website promoting the Estonian e-firms, <https://e-estoniastartups.com/>.

meant to fail easily). This is because the current official message from Estonia – the international government message, one that was used as the key note in the literal sense – during the EU presidency in 2017 – is that the (nation) state, the Western, *our* state is dying. Therefore, somehow it must fall if “we” want to stay on top of things globally. This we find in the pronouncement of those who dominate the discourse: President Kersti Kaljulaid; Kaspar Korjus, one of the leading protagonists of e-Estonia, the managing director of the e-residency program who has been referred to in headlines as “Estonia’s Top Futurist [who] Explains How Tech will Make Countries Obsolete” (Browne, 2017), and who has earned the crown as the by far most media-present Estonian (Lõugas, 2018); and Taavi Kotka, the former CEO of Nortal, Government CIO between 2013 and 2017, and now back in consulting, who is generally credited with the creation (along with others) of both e-residency and the digital embassies, the last of Estonia’s key e-Gov features (Kotka et al., 2015, p. 1).

Since 2014, “e-residency represents the latest in this explosive succession of e-government innovations” (Kotka et al., 2015, p. 4). This rather brilliant and much-hyped idea to give foreigners an Estonian ID card upon application (not valid for travel or physical residency) so that they can partake in Estonian public (and also private) services has made e-Estonia the darling of the global e-community. The key aspect to remember is that e-residency realistically only works as a supplement, not substitute, of classical nation-state citizenship, while its development – the recently launched e-residency 2.0 – seems entirely unplanned and somewhat random (Korjus, 2018). But when Kaljulaid habitually claims that “as the President of Estonia, I represent the only truly digital society which actually has a state” (Kaljulaid, 2017; see also the respective anecdote in Heller, 2017), this is a reversal of the classic European idea of a state above and beyond nation/society⁷ (Hegel, 1820). Therefore, this goes well beyond a neo-liberal public-service-delivery focus, and she ends up going back to the notion of a society/nation (however digital or not) that controls, indeed that owns the state (see Skinner, 2017).⁸

The reason for this is probably the fact that Estonia has been a nation state in any real-existing sense for only a half-a-century (Mälksoo, 2018; Taagepera, 2018, pp. 11-12). Until then, in modern history, Estonians were colonized from all directions, and mostly they had little connection to state and government (Drechsler & Kattel, 2000). Also, they lived in villages, whereas the cities in Estonia were essentially foreign with most of them gaining an Estonian majority only in the late-mid-19th century – Tallinn, *taani linn*, the city of Danes, is a capital city that even in name belongs to “others”. 2018 is the 100th anniversary of the Republic of Estonia, but only if one starts in 1918 and blends out, which legally one doubtlessly can (Drechsler & Annus, 2002; Mälksoo, 2003), the times when there was just a legal-fictive state and in reality a Soviet Republic (1940-1991). That is, unless,

⁷ In the Estonian context, while there are copious references to the *digital* society, the discursive antagonism is not between state and society. Instead, it is between state and nation, with which the ethno-cultural, Estonian, Estonian-speaking group inside Estonia (and outside in the diaspora) is meant.

⁸ Riisalo (i2018), Vaarik (i2018), and others emphasized that Kaljulaid does not mean that in any constitutional-theoretical way, but that she merely wants to emphasize her role as a representative of society rather than politics or government.

as Mälksoo (2018) very recently emphasized, one is able to see the ESSR as some form of Estonian statehood, and not just as an occupation. But as Aristotle states, “when the type of government changes and becomes different... the state no longer is the same” (Arist. Pol. III 1276b; Drechsler, 1999).

Apart from legal reasoning, this may already give an indication that “Estonia” is in principle not even a nation *state*, but a small, ethnically homogeneous, conversant unit. Meaning it is essentially a tribe—and the modern nation state within which it exists is something that is owed to the world order we have, but not something to which Estonians have any closer relation (see also Tammpuu & Masso, 2018). The 100th anniversary of the Estonian Republic was thus a celebration that 100 years ago, for the first time (or at least again after several hundreds of years), the Estonian nation, (as in people, tribe, or what in other contexts would be called society), was able to govern itself in the international political context (Mälksoo, 2018).⁹ But this political state is not the core of one’s identity to the degree that “Estonia” (nation) is. The state is, to quote the Legal Chancellor, often seen as a tool for the Estonian nation (Madise, i2018). Historically, the state as an institution, both as Soviet legacy and over the centuries if not millennia, was always suspect—in Estonian history, the state was evil, the nation was good; the nation was us, the state was them (Drechsler, 1995; 1999).¹⁰ It has often been claimed that this is also at the basis of the previously mentioned, crucial neo-liberal consensus of Estonia politically, where even the Social Democrats are neo-liberal of sorts (Drechsler & Madise, 2004). Thus, the respect for the state as such is low (Skinner, 2017) as well as the fear of one’s (own) state. Hence, an almost cognitively dissonant, and much bigger confidence than in most other countries exists. For instance, in the example of e-health, there is a strong belief that nothing negative can be done by the state.¹¹

⁹ Mälksoo considers whether “celebrating 100 years of statehood can also be too little, an understatement”, if one considers, e. g., the Livonian Confederation, a predecessor of the Estonian Republic, which already First-Republic legal scholar and erstwhile foreign minister, Ants Piip, has claimed (2018). This would have been a state with entirely ethnic-German control and no say by any ethnic Estonian; however, it may be doubtful how much this would be a thought shared by many Estonian-Estonians today.

¹⁰ All interviewees corroborated that, except for Mälksoo (i2018), who insisted that those with a genuine Estonian State identity do exist, if in a minority.

¹¹ Familiarity with the entire community does also increase trust, but contrary to political speeches, it is absence of fear rather than trust that marks Estonia’s precondition for successful DG, a feature that e. g. in Germany is completely absent. Trust in government in Estonia is marketed as extremely high and as a foundation of Estonian DG – the President in 2018 for instance, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FaQf9dSXs8I>, or Keen (2018), or the nonsensical <https://www.sunstonecommunication.com/sunstoneblog/estonia-land-of-digital-trust>, and according to older Eurobarometer results, it is higher than the EU average – https://www.baltictimes.com/estonians__trust_in_parliament__government_much_higher_than_eu_average/ – but only at 51% and declining. More importantly, according to the standard OECD statistics, it has not only been declining during the last decade but is now, well below the average of the countries measured, below 40%; https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/gov_glance-2017-76-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/gov_glance-2017-76-en.

Finally, an emphasis on the Estonian Republic state would also mean greater power and importance for the Russian(-speaking) population. They still comprise about 30% of the population and are not generally counted into Estonia in the sense of Estonian nation by “Estonian Estonians”. (The situation is improving, partially because of the Refugee Crisis, but very slowly; Aidarov, i2018.) One cannot define a republic exclusively on ethnic-nationalist grounds—but no matter what the external rhetoric, for most ethnic Estonians, the Estonian Republic is probably still ideally an ethnically homogeneous nation state (Aidarov & Drechsler, 2011; 2013; Aidarov, i2018). It is interesting that e-Estonia with its internationalizing tendencies does not seem to better the standing and professional engagement of Estonian Russians, but practically (rather than in policy) it does include to some extent Russian-speaking migrants from the former USSR, including Russia (Aidarov, i2018). A recent Western media piece promoting Tallinn as a hub for digital nomads, on the other hand, cheerily proclaimed about e-residency, “In fact, you could argue that one aim is to reduce Russia’s influence by loading the city with Western entrepreneurs,” referring to Estonian-Russians in the rest of the paragraph (Beech, 2018). The character of Estonian e-Gov as part of that kind of Estonian-Estonian nation-state building is still under scholarly discussion (e. g. Björklund, 2016 vs. Tammpuu & Masso, 2018, who differentiate more between internal and external functions of Estonian e-Gov).

5. Russia: Tallinn Death Wishes

We have now reached the point where the elephant in the room must be addressed head on—one that is essential for understanding both Estonian DG and why the β -Version is neglected. As Kotka put it, “Another driving factor [for e-Estonia’s success] was Russia’s invasion of Crimea. Estonia has been occupied every century in our history. Russia occupied us just 80 years ago. What if Russia invaded again? Can we become a virtual country?” (Taavi Kotka in High, 2018a).

“To put it bluntly, if more people can point to Estonia on a map then it’s harder to wipe us from it” (Korjus, 2018). Russia experts might explain that the chances that this would happen are extremely low, Crimea annexation or not (e. g. Colton, 2016, pp. 193-199), and show that if anything, Russia is embarrassed by Estonia’s success (pp. 209, 214). But from the Estonian perspective, it does seem that every time the threat seems banned, it comes back (Taagepera, 2018, pp. 125-128). Perhaps, one can say that in regards to the Russian danger, the off-chance that something might happen, is just big enough in Estonia that one can never neglect it.

How can one really access the feeling of existential threat (see McKew, 2018), one that inevitably comes from Russia, that seems to lie at the root of the Estonian condition wherever one looks, even whenever we talk about ICT, eGov, and DG? Estonia’s inner—but not that often marketed—focus on cybersecurity is one of the reasons why the system, such as it is, is so closed and so safety-

oriented.¹² There is this *mélange* of hating the state (as such and Russia in particular) and loving it (one's own but not really fully), and also of risking the nation state but just in order to retain it. I will try to access this strange scenario with a brief dual vignette, and here we enter an area of complete speculation or even association on my part.

In short, one could argue that the original (in the sense of from the origins/beginnings) virtuality of Estonia as a Nation State, its continued perceived precariousness, and the continued potential threat by another, very successful Nation State (the old Colonial power), are the reasons why Estonia can so easily (and even wants to) abandon the idea of the classic Nation State. That is why it can gamble with the state-as-startup concept, and that is one of the reasons (with push-pull and financial/prestige gain) why it may think it has to hype the fairy tale story. It is so that other countries, like it or at least know it, and thus will perhaps do something against a Russian invasion—or not, if you consider that existential threats (especially continuous existential threats), are difficult to handle over long periods of time. All of it seems a bit like the long-term care for a terminally ill person—there may be a secret hope to have the agony end, for the other as well as for oneself. And altogether, this fatigue from defending oneself is sometimes noticeable in the Estonian discourse, if not always easily and not for the casual observer.

Both of these approaches are kitchen-Freudian, an approach that is quite prominent in Estonia (if also beautifully ridiculed by Tartu Psychologist Jüri Allik, the most eminent social scientist working in Estonia; Allik, 1998). The first, easier speculation goes into the direction of parricide, of the *Übervatermord* (1989b), or at least some similar such phenomenon—and that is, of Putin and Russia as father. If nation states cease to exist, the Russian Empire's threat ceases to exist as well, and as a tribe, Estonia can theoretically survive where and as what it is in a new 'Time of the Tribes'.

One notch up, we could also allow the Estonian Nation State something akin to "murder by suicide", i.e. that if just focused on the *Eesti Vabariik*, if it is finally gone (again), one can relax and make one's money somewhere else. This is seemingly somewhat in opposition to the state/nation state/Estonia argument, but again, if the nation state is not such a big deal, it is more easily sacrificed than elsewhere.

This "death drive" (Freud, 1989a) is actually a receded but still prominent traditional aspect of Tallinn, the old Reval, as in of Venice ("Death in Venice", etc.). One of its most famous chroniclers, Werner Bergengruen, has emphasized this in his well-known 1939 collection *Der Tod von Reval*, which is still in press (2006). The German title suggests both "the death that comes from Tallinn" and "the death of Tallinn", and both are relevant here. The most important artwork in Tallinn is a *danse macabre*, a Dance of Death, now only a fragment of Bernt Notke's High Gothic masterpiece in the St. Nicholas Church (created just before 1500; Freytag, 1993). The fragment that survives,

¹² Being anything but a website, nor a platform in the Tim O'Reilly sense (2010), Estonian DG is closed and secured like the Apple orbit—and when it opens, as in the new "government cloud" initiative, then it will be only to for-profit companies; <https://e-estonia.com/government-cloud-infrastructure-service/>.

however, shows death in the form of skeletons with some skin still attached, dancing just with the representatives of Government (indeed of the state) into their graves: Pope, Emperor, Empress, Cardinal, and Duke.

Illustration 1: The Death of Tallinn

(https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Niguliste_kirik#/media/File:Bernt_Notke_Danse_Macabre.jpg)



Whether Tallinn really has such a melancholy, Venetian air may be questionable, and the Tallinn Death refers to the German Balts, which are practically all gone. However, the fact that Old Town and Cathedral Hill practically have no people left, no playing children, and that they have degenerated into a theme-park-like place for tourists that leave the real city strangely empty actually might (for the more sensitive), conjure up images of the smiling skulls in St. Nicholas. And this idea of Tallinn as a *memento mori*, as a reminder that death comes in the end, may underline the wish, not to kill, but to die, so that the struggle is finally over.

This historical mantle is not only far-fetched but also very likely nothing that the 5th-layer Generation of Tallinn ICT gurus, politicians, e-vangelists, and their global media support would accept. Meaning, it is not supported by those who right now seem to own the e-discourse in Estonia, who make this point of death about killing the state by transforming it into a service platform. However, they do employ an undertaker rhetoric, just like the skeletons, and the *danse macabre* for the state is by implication one for the Estonian Republic, as well. Nevertheless, the actual effect seems to be the opposite – for now.

6. Coda: Which narrative should it be?

Convenience is at the core of technology's non-coercive distribution (Jünger, 2010)¹³; DG does require catering to the new needs of citizen customers as perceived by themselves, and it is nice to know when the bus will really arrive. With some luck, as in the cases of Postmodernism and Orientalism, the e-Estonian discourse on the abolition of the state will be good for lesson-drawing, and the scenario of a stateless life will serve as a heuristic utopia at best, not one to be actually pursued (Drechsler, 2002).

¹³ Kotka (2018) argues for the opposite, however, claiming, "Estonians are very rational people. We didn't ask [if they wanted ID cards]. We just forced it. Innovation through pain has always been a key element of change. If the engineers say you have to do it this way – it's not a question for debate."

Since this discourse is highly representative of our current times, paradoxically, both the “killing-the-nation-state” rhetoric by e-Estonia and the fairy tale of e-Estonia itself have actually legitimized the Estonian nation state among its peers—the Estonian *Republic* is in several ways globally stronger and prouder than ever. The intention in launching the e-residency was the opposite of using “new technologies to expand the global reach of a nation-state” (Orgad, 2018), but rather instead to kill it. However, ironically, that is the effect e-residency has had.¹⁴

But there is the problem that e-Estonia is clearly overhyped. An overblown story is risky, and the question is whether it is even needed. Furthermore, because of the special nature of the Estonian state, all of this is highly context specific. Thus, it may happen in some countries or other entities that this narrative will be appropriated for political means, misunderstood as inevitable, or that it is in fashion (which e-Estonia does ride highly successfully), and then creates such a tsunami that all resistance is futile.

But why would that be a problem? As I was asked by a colleague at the Tallinn eGov2018 conference (<http://2018.tallinnconference.ee/>): Wouldn't there be cases of (good and needed) digital transformations of government that owed their success to the Estonian model as inspiration that it can be done, never mind whether it is true or not? The answer, I ventured to guess, would be in the affirmative. But on this speculative level, there may also be losses imagined: Statehood abolished, capacity reduced, and structures imposed on less unafraid societies where they would never work or only serve for some sort of exploitation. And the Estonian tendency to be tech-driven, rather than tech-based like the Finns, is not only risky reputation-wise, but it also risks abolishing (liberal-democratic) achievements. This is because technology just does not automatically lead to agreed-upon ethical goals (see just Osnos, 2018). However, it is true that not needing any DG inspiration is also an Estonian perspective; as in Estonia, there are truly relatively few barriers for it, both institutionally and mentally.

Yet, only when we remove the layers of PR do we have the chance to genuinely learn from (and even for) Estonia what can successfully be digitalized and what maybe cannot, and that is still a fantastic story. Unfortunately, if a story sounds too good to be true, then it is probably because it is.

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¹⁴ As a conspiracy theory, one could assume that this had been planned all along by the e-residency protagonists, but from the textual base and personal observation, I would say that this seems highly unlikely.

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Vaarik, Daniel, PR consultant, former Speaker of the Government, former CEO of Hill & Knowlton Estonia, 14 May 2018.

Velmet, Aro, Assistant Professor of History, University of Southern California, 10 May 2018.

Viik, Linnar, founder and program director, Estonian e-Governance Academy, 2 May 2018.

All interviews are marked “i2018”. Aidarov and Madise are my own PhDs; Riisalo was an undergraduate student of mine; Vaarik a colleague on the PRAXIS board – this, in Estonia, is unavoidable. Interview requests for this round were generally not with the usual suspects (who have mostly been interviewed for Kattel and Mergel, 2019), but with Estonia(n) experts when specific points needed to be checked in a context where there is a paucity of scholarly writing. One request remained unanswered (MP); another was first agreed to but further inquiries remained unanswered (government startup executive); a third was conducted but in the end not used (IT specialist).

About the Author

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Wolfgang Drechsler is Professor of Governance at the Ragnar Nurkse Department of Innovation and Governance at Tallinn University of Technology, Estonia. He is also Associate at Harvard University's Davis Center. His most recent visiting professorship was at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore. In civil service, Wolfgang has been Advisor to the President of Estonia; Executive Secretary with the German Wissenschaftsrat during German Reunification; and, as an APSA Congressional Fellow, Senior Legislative Analyst in the United States Congress. He was vice chair of the executive board of PRAXIS, Estonia's pre-eminent public policy think tank, and a member of the Innovation Policy Council of the Estonian Ministry of Economics. In Estonia since 1993, he taught the perhaps first academic e-Gov class in the country in 2002 at the University of Tartu, and he co-authored the perhaps first scholarly inside article on Estonian e-voting (Drechsler and Madise, 2004). Yale University Press will publish his Inno-

vation Bureaucracies: Agile Stability creates the Entrepreneurial State (with Rainer Kattel and Erkki Karo) in 2020.