



THE STORY OF

by Rene Mäe

# e-ESTONIA

A DISCOURSE-THEORETICAL APPROACH

## abstract

This paper traces the emergence of various digital technology-driven policy ideas in Estonia during the last two decades. The article is specifically concerned with the idea of e-Estonia, a signifier that is widely used as shorthand to denote Estonia's success in developing digital solutions in government, public management, business, education, etc. The paper analyzes the idea of e-Estonia to disclose, contextualize, and critically explain the particular discursive practices that constitute the e-Estonia discourse. It offers a discourse-theoretical reading of e-Estonia in terms of different types of discursive 'logics'. Finally, the paper argues for the importance of recognizing what is at stake in the act of naming e-Estonia.

**KEYWORDS:** Estonia, e-Estonia, e-government, postsocialism, nation branding, discourse theory.

Over the last two decades “e-Estonia” has appeared as one of the most popular terms to capture Estonia's achievements in the fields of public administration, digital technology and e-government. e-Estonia has become a shorthand label widely used by national leaders, IT gurus, diplomats, and digital technology enthusiasts alike to evoke Estonia's success in the digitalization of its public institutions through the implementation of particular e-solutions. Especially over the current decade, e-Estonia has become a signifier of Estonia's success and gradually acquired a powerful narrative dimension. The e-Estonia story circulates around the local and international media, e-government conferences, and various PR events. In this narrative, Estonia, after regaining its national independence in 1991, has successfully transformed itself from an

underdeveloped, post-Soviet transition state into e-Estonia, an advanced digital society.<sup>1</sup> As the Estonian historian Aro Velmet suggests, the notion of Estonia as an e-state has paved the way for a particular kind of digital patriotism in which Estonia's digital solutions, such as "e-voting, e-prescription and e-residency are common terms not only among engineers but work as symbols that people use generally to express feelings of pride in their country".<sup>2</sup>

**DURING THE CURRENT** decade, the term e-Estonia has been used as a basis for (or a way to justify) various governmental and quasi-governmental initiatives and projects. It has started to appear in a variety of new policy papers, plans, and programs, as organizational bodies that consciously, explicitly, and deliberately exploit the signifier e-Estonia. For example, the "e-Estonia showroom", established in 2011, is presented as a place where "global policy makers, political leaders, corporate executives, investors and international media" become acquainted with the "success story of e-Estonia".<sup>3</sup> As one of the booklets associated with the showroom puts it, this success story of e-Estonia is the story of "one of the most advanced e-societies in the world [...] that grew out of a partnership between a forward-thinking government, a proactive ICT sector and a switched-on, tech-savvy population".<sup>4</sup> From there on, the Estonian government founded the "e-Estonia council" as its Strategy Unit<sup>5</sup> (in 2014); the Estonian PR guru Daniel Vaarik published the "White Paper on Estonia's Digital Ideology"<sup>6</sup> (in 2015), and an Estonian PR firm called Callisto Group published "The plan for developing and enhancing the international image of e-Estonia, 2017–2019"<sup>7</sup> (2016), commissioned by the Ministry of Economy and Communications. These initiatives and papers not only describe what e-Estonia is but also propose a variety of activities (conscious media planning, academic research) to develop and promote the idea of e-Estonia.

In this essay, I do not aim to offer additional support for or discredit the claims made by those policy analysts, journalists, government officials, e-government managers, and the like who propose (or assume) that e-Estonia is just a neutral, accurate, and convenient term to grasp a variety of different projects and solutions in the field of e-government and e-democracy. Instead, I will concentrate on various discourses that have made this particular notion (and story) of e-Estonia possible in the first place. I will explore these questions by taking a discourse-theoretical approach and following three relatively general research questions: what is "e-Estonia" as an object of discourse-theoretical research; how did the signifier "e-Estonia" emerge and why does it continue to persist, even after almost two decades since its "invention"?

More precisely, I will follow the premises of poststructuralist or political<sup>8</sup> discourse theory as Ernesto Laclau (and Chantal Mouffe) have developed it.<sup>9</sup> While Laclau's work deals with

questions of (political) philosophy, Marxism, hegemony theory, and poststructuralism in a rather general manner, I will mostly (but not exclusively) draw on reformulations and refinements of Laclauian poststructuralist discourse theory as they have appeared in the works of Laclau's students, associates, and followers.<sup>10</sup>

The structure of the paper is as follows: First, I will offer a general overview of the issues, projects and initiatives that concern the keywords such as e-government and e-democracy. Second, I will schematically outline the ontological premises, theoretical concepts, and methodological considerations of discourse theory. Third I will focus on the different signifying logics that have made the e-Estonia discourse possible. Finally, I will look at e-Estonia as a name that may open up e-Estonia's political dimension.

## From e-government to e-democracy and back

E-government seems to be one of the most common nodal points that has allowed national leaders, policymakers, policy analysts, and public management experts to link together a variety of e-solutions (e.g. e-voting, e-taxation, e-schools) that have been developed and implemented in Estonia from the early 2000s on. In other words, there are a number of e-government

researchers<sup>11</sup> who regard Estonia as the pioneering state in the field of e-government. There are also some policy researchers who question this assumption by tracing and analyzing actual policies and policymaking attempts in the fields of information and communication technology and information society in Estonia.

For example, Meelis Kitsing argues that even by the early 2000s there was no clearly formulated "grand strategy" behind Estonian e-government projects.

Quite the contrary: "spending on ICT remained modest from 1995–2003, in comparison to other countries".<sup>12</sup> Moreover, the timeline of Estonia's e-government-specific legislation was in line with that of other Eastern European countries such as Slovakia or Latvia. Furthermore, the "Tiger's Leap"<sup>13</sup> project that is considered to be one of the landmarks in the digitalization of public institutions in the 1990s should be seen as a "basic provision of public goods" in the form of IT rather than genuine technological innovation.<sup>14</sup> Kitsing's research does not seem to confirm that the success of Estonia's e-government projects resulted from the deliberate "early investment in ICT, accompanied by the necessary reforms".<sup>15</sup> Instead, it would be more accurate to describe Estonian e-government projects as a "success without strategy".<sup>16</sup> Namely, what has been successful is the creation of the "impression that Estonian e-government is the result of a grand strategy and deliberate action by rational policymakers".<sup>17</sup>

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The simplifying accounts that conceive Estonian e-government projects as a conscious strategy of Estonian national leaders or government officials<sup>18</sup> also tend to overlook the fact that some of the most important digitalization projects in the early 2000s grew out of *close cooperation* between commercial enterprises and state institutions. For example, even the cornerstone of Estonia's e-government projects, the ID card, introduced in 2002, was a result of a coincidental interaction between banks and government, inspired by Internet banking services that had already been launched by Estonian banks in 1996.<sup>19</sup> While commercial enterprises such as banks initiated digitalization projects to cut costs and increase competitiveness, the Estonian right-wing political leaders of the 1990s saw digital technology as a tool for "creating a minimal and efficient state".<sup>20</sup> Thus, in the late 1990s the discourse of e-government became a valuable currency among national leaders and provided politicians a convenient way "to show themselves as a force of progress, while political forces on the left showed reluctance and skepticism towards e-government".<sup>21</sup> It is important to acknowledge that the late 1990s were not only a time when Estonia anticipated joining the European Union, but also the time when the EU itself started to take an interest in the globally spreading buzzword "e-government".<sup>22</sup>

Another, related, term that also emerged in Estonia in the early 2000s is *e-democracy*. This term is clearly much more ambiguous than e-government since it moves toward politically loaded concepts such as "empowerment", "participation" and "decision-making" rather than "efficiency", "mobility" and "flexibility". So from 2000 on, various platforms for practicing e-democracy were set up in Estonia<sup>23</sup> as a kind of an expansion, or a more democratic form of e-government. By now, most of these platforms for practicing e-democracy have been shut down. Moreover, the very term e-democracy has largely disappeared from public discourse altogether. As Fredrika Björklund notes, although "democracy" was an important concept in Estonian information society policy documents in the 1990s, it was later replaced with the notion of a "citizen-centered society".<sup>24</sup> For her, this terminological change reflects a shift in which "[t]he citizen as a political agent has been pushed aside and replaced by the apolitical individual".<sup>25</sup>

Aro Velmet has also observed the gradual depoliticization of the subjects of the Estonian e-state. Whereas the notions of e-government and democracy revolved around empowerment and transparency in the early 2000s, the current Estonian e-state can be more adequately grasped with the metaphor of a "huge app-store".<sup>26</sup> The Estonian e-state, he argues, reduces citizens to individual consumers whose main task is to use the solutions developed by engineers and public officials rather than pro-

viding a political space where discussions can be held on how problems are raised and solutions proposed in the first place.<sup>27</sup> Thus he claims that it is not democratic participation or empowerment that the Estonian e-state is concerned with. Rather it is the emerging digital economy, the potential of e-solutions to enhance entrepreneurship, attract foreign capital and a highly qualified workforce, and to build up Estonia's international image as an advanced digital society.

**IN CONCLUSION**, then, the research that specifically concentrates on issues of e-government or e-democracy as such is valuable for different reasons. For example, tracing *actual* policymaking practices contextualizes these practices within certain social and

political debates and helps to problematize some of the more popular (and overly optimistic and deterministic) interpretations of policy development. In this essay, however, I do not want to frame e-Estonia as strictly an e-government project. Nor do I want to concentrate on the political aspects of e-democracy, even though it has proved to be a valuable research object for discourse-theoretical research.<sup>28</sup> Rather, I am interested in the ways in which e-government and e-democracy have become more commonly articulated as elements of the e-Estonia discourse, rather than the other way around.

Before moving closer to a discourse-theoretical analysis of the idea and story of e-Estonia, I need to lay some theoretical and methodological groundwork. As a first step, therefore, I will elaborate on the ontological premises of discourse theory and define its main theoretical concepts that allow us to formulate the more precise aims of the analysis.

## What is discourse theory?

Firstly, the concept of discourse in poststructuralist discourse theory is formulated in *ontological* rather than empirical (or *ontic*) terms. The engagement with "ontological rather than just the epistemological and methodological aspects of interpretation, analysis and critique"<sup>29</sup> is also one of the most distinctive aspects of a discourse-theoretical approach. Following from these premises we can define discourse as "a *relational* system of *signifying practices* that is produced through historical and *ultimately political* interventions and provides a *contingent horizon* of any meaningful object".<sup>30</sup> Since discourse is defined as a system of signifying practices, it involves much more than only verbal and written text. For discourse theorists, text and discourse are not strictly linguistic phenomena; rather, they tend to involve a wide range of data such as "policy statements, speeches, images, statues, signs and monuments"<sup>31</sup> in their research projects. Although discourse theory uses a number of linguistic categories (e.g. signifier and signified, paradigm and syntagm), they "cease

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[...] to be merely regional categories of a linguistics conceived in a narrow sense".<sup>32</sup> One of the reasons why these linguistic categories have found their way into discourse theory is that it places central importance on rhetoric, or more precisely, "the constitutive character of rhetoric"<sup>33</sup> in social and political practices.

Second, when discourse theorists analyze particular discourses, they are interested in the "conditions of possibility" of those discourses, rather than connecting or reducing discursive practices to some presupposed extra-discursive entity (e.g. society or economy). They presume that "whilst objects clearly 'exist' independently of any particular discourse, their meaning and significance for situated subjects – and how they are engaged with – depends on [...] discursive *articulations*".<sup>34</sup> Or, to put it differently, every discourse is the result of an articulatory practice that creates "a relation among elements such that their identity is modified".<sup>35</sup> Hence, we can say that the concept (and practice) of articulation is virtually synonymous with discourse. Both of these concepts are essential to how discourse theory understands the social production of meaning. In other words, since discourse theory presumes that no social (discursive) practice is "governed by any underlying metaphysical principle or ground"<sup>36</sup> it treats all discourses as incomplete and partial. Specifically, particular discourses are considered as *historically specific* attempts to create "nodal points that partially fix meaning"<sup>37</sup> and "arrest the flow of differences" in the discursive field.<sup>38</sup> This discursive field, in turn, is conceived as "a theoretical horizon within which the being of objects is constituted".<sup>39</sup>

Third, poststructuralist discourse theory is also "a species of critical theory" and is thus interested not only in interpretation and characterization of discourses but in their *critique* as well.<sup>40</sup> The critical aspect is also reflected in the central position that concepts such as "hegemony" and "the political" assume in a discourse-theoretical framework. Since discourse theory presumes that there is no *necessary* connection between certain objects, processes, and practices that a particular discourse articulates, it also asks why it still happens that often "one signifier rather than another assumes in different circumstances that signifying function".<sup>41</sup> To answer that question, Laclau and other poststructuralist discourse theorists have turned to the concept of hegemony as a way to conceive "the never-concluded attempts to produce a fixation, to which there will always be a threat".<sup>42</sup> In other words, the concept of hegemony points to the presumption that there is *always* something that is *excluded* from a particular discourse. It follows that discourse theory asserts "the primacy of the political over the social"<sup>43</sup> by presupposing that every social order and practice "arises as a political construction that involves the exclusion of certain possibilities".<sup>44</sup>

**WHILE IT IS PRECISELY** the premise about "the primacy of the political" that has provoked some of the most crucial (ontological) debates among discourse theorists and political philosophers, I do not have the space, nor do I see the need to open up these de-

bates here. Instead, I will now move closer to analytical and theoretical concepts that have been developed in discourse theory for conducting concrete empirical discourse analyses. Following from the premise that all practices are *signifying* practices that "are located within a field of discursive social relations",<sup>45</sup> Jason Glynos and David Howarth have aimed to point out and elaborate the different types of signifying practices. They understand these different types of signifying practices in terms of different (signifying) *logics*.

## The logics of critical explanation in discourse theory

To define the concept of *logic*, Glynos and Howarth turn to the notion of family resemblances and language games as understood by Ludwig Wittgenstein. Hence, they propose that no concept cannot be defined only in abstract terms but needs to take into account the different ways it is used in practice as well.<sup>46</sup> Rather than proposing a correct/incorrect definition of a logic, they define it by what it is not. First, the concept of a logic does not involve "the formal analysis of propositions in order to determine their validity or truth-value"; nor is it a causal law; nor is it "synonymous with tendencies that are conceived as weak or 'soft' laws".<sup>47</sup>

As a theoretical concept, logic primarily concerns the interpretation, explanation, and critique of *discursive practices*, rather than the logic of some extra-discursive entities such as "social structures" or "causal mechanisms".<sup>48</sup> This concept of logic, however, is firmly grounded in discourse theory's underlying social ontology that distinguishes four dimensions of social reality. Whereas the *social dimension* concerns the ways in which "subjects are absorbed in their practices", the *political dimension* refers to the ways in which social relations are challenged "in the name of a principle or ideal" and, as a result, existing social relations become dislocated. The *ideological dimension* concerns "that aspect of social relations in which subjects are complicit in concealing the radical contingency of social relations" and the *ethical dimension*, in contrast, aims to capture the attentiveness of subjects to this radical contingency.<sup>49</sup> Since these dimensions are formulated on the ontological level, they "are always to some degree present in any particular practice or regime".<sup>50</sup> As a way to capture those four dimensions in empirical research, Glynos and Howarth distinguish between three types of explanatory logics. In other words, as theoretical concepts, it is the *social logics*, *political logics* and *fantasmatic logics* that have "a role to play in articulating a complete explanatory account"<sup>51</sup> of a practice or a regime of practices.

First, social logics allow us to characterize, describe and discern the "rules and norms" that govern a certain discursive practice<sup>52</sup> and to "capture those aspects that make it tick".<sup>53</sup> Second, political logics offer a way to "explore how social practices are instituted, contested, and defended"<sup>54</sup> through two particular political logics – the "logic of equivalence" and "logic of difference". As Laclau and Mouffe put it, "the logic of equivalence is a logic of the simplification of political space, while the logic of difference is a logic of its expansion and increasing complex-



Images from the Estonian tourist board, promoting a digitalized lifestyle in e-Estonia.

ity”.<sup>55</sup> Equivential and differential logics allow us to consider whether a discourse constructs identities either through “common ‘negative’, threat or enemy” or “through non-adversarial, ‘positive’ differences”.<sup>56</sup> Equivential and differential logics are always present in every discursive articulation because all meaning and identity is “discursively constructed through chains of equivalence” that relationally sort and link different signs.<sup>57</sup> In equivential chains, however, the difference between discursive elements is necessarily undermined or ignored in order to form relations of equivalence between various objects, practices, and processes. Third, fantasmatic logics point to the “ideological dimension” by analyzing the ways in which “subjects are complicit in concealing or covering over the radical contingency of social relations”.<sup>58</sup> Fantasmatic logics most often appear through a fantasmatic narrative that “promises a fullness-to-come once a named or implied obstacle is overcome” while it points to the terrible consequences that can follow if subjects do not subscribe to a discourse.<sup>59</sup>

Following from these definitions, it becomes easier to understand why one shouldn’t expect from discourse theorists that they simply provide a detailed description of a certain representation of a particular issue. That is simply because discourse theorists do not “assume the prior existence of a particular structure, agent or object”.<sup>60</sup> Rather than studying particular issues and representations, discourse theorists try to critically explain what makes particular representations “possible in the first place”.<sup>61</sup> Furthermore, they try to make the phenomena under investigation “intelligible both for the subjects involved in the activity studied and for the subjects who are studying the phenomena”.<sup>62</sup>

In the remaining part of the article I will try to offer a sche-

matic discourse-theoretical reading of e-Estonia. I will follow general questions such as: How can we characterize e-Estonia as a discourse or discursive practice? Where did it come from and how was it formed? How and why is it sustained? How could we evaluate and criticize e-Estonia as a discursive formation?<sup>63</sup> I will try to answer these questions in terms of social, political, and fantasmatic logics.

## Branding e-Estonia

In recent years, the story of e-Estonia has been promoted through various materials, mostly published by Enterprise Estonia, as well as through other initiatives funded by EAS.<sup>64</sup> In e-Estonia, bureaucracy has become “a thing of the past”. In e-Estonia, one can easily cast a “ballot from the comfort of your living room”.<sup>65</sup> As it appears, the “e” in Estonia means a lot more

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than just “electronic” – it refers to “The Epic Story of the e-State”<sup>66</sup> that is also “empowering”, “easy”, “efficient”, “economical”, and “engaging”. It is precisely these kinds of figures and pompous slogans that have also found their way into the public presentations of various advocates of e-Estonia. These promoters – national leaders, government officials and PR gurus – have presented these stories at various conferences on e-government, public management, and digital technology both locally<sup>67</sup> and internationally.<sup>68</sup> Furthermore, e-Estonia has even been the theme of a party: in 2016 the technology conference Slush was opened with the “Enter e-Estonia” theme party, fea-

ture “the brightest tech companies and the best cuisine from Estonia and the most exciting music from both sides of the Gulf of Finland”, opened with a speech by Estonia’s newly elected president, Kersti Kaljulaid.<sup>69</sup> On closer observation, one cannot



fail to notice the similarities that e-Estonia shares with the practice of nation branding.

THE TERM NATION branding emerged most powerfully after the end of the Cold War with the demand for “nations to redefine and reposition themselves within the master narrative of globalization”.<sup>70</sup> Alongside the post-1989 geopolitical changes, nation branding agencies, consultancies, and experts started to emerge. By now, the idea that a nation is something that can and should be branded has established itself as a common premise for a practice of communicating, commodifying, and marketing the nation to and throughout the world.<sup>71</sup> At the same time when post-communist nation-states had their “identity struggles” and tried to forget the “shameful” past and pin down their new and “desired” identities in the East/West hermeneutic, discourses of nation branding provided many effective methods to do that. In other words, it helped Eastern European nation-states to “intertwine nationalism with globalization”.<sup>72</sup> Moreover, as nation branding practitioners see nation brands as a “benign form of national consciousness”,<sup>73</sup> it provided Eastern European nation-states an effective way to articulate the category of the nation with the new, globalized world, without the more radical expressions of nationalism.

One way to concisely define nation branding is to conceive it as a “particular form of national consciousness” that is produced at the intersection of “the nation” and the “tools, techniques, and expertise from the world of corporate brand management”.<sup>74</sup> Alternatively, we can approach it as a result of a transnational “culture of circulation” that produces “a particular type of understanding of the nation as a competitive, contemporary and commodifiable entity rather than – or in addition to – a sovereign nation state”.<sup>75</sup> Nation branding, then, represents a transformative change in the imagining of nations whereby theories and concepts from PR, marketing, and branding intertwine with or replace “core political concepts such as citizenship,

national sovereignty and democracy”.<sup>76</sup> Nation branding experts have also suggested that the most successful nation branding projects are the ones that manage to influence citizens to “perform attitudes and behaviors that are compatible with the brand strategy”<sup>77</sup> and to cultivate the roles of the “brand ambassador, brand champion, brand exemplar, or brand carrier” among its citizens.<sup>78</sup>

Even though e-Estonia is not explicitly framed as a nation branding project, many of its aspects seem to correspond to the established definitions and categories used by nation branding researchers. Building on the different elements of nation branding discourse outlined above, I suggest that we bring these elements together under the more general notion of the “logics of nation branding”. First of all, the signifier e-Estonia allows the obscuring of different social categories. Namely, it interchangeably refers to Estonia as “the digital society”,<sup>79</sup> a “digitalized nation”,<sup>80</sup> and a country that is “run like a start-up”<sup>81</sup> or offered as a “service”.<sup>82</sup> Second, the “logics of nation branding” also help to grasp how the e-Estonia discourse depends on the production of a variety of new, distinctive subjects (e-Estonians, e-Residents), the devices they use (the ID card), and the practices (e-voting, digital signing) they engage in. Third, e-Estonia necessarily involves the situating of these various social categories (nation, society, country) and subject-positions in a global context. This aspect of the “logics of nation branding” can be more clearly exemplified by one of the most recent initiatives of e-Estonia: the *e-Residency* project.

### e-Estonians and e-Residents

While the e-Residency project is framed as another project of e-Estonia, it also appears to be one of the most “revolutionary” among them by being presented as “a step towards fulfilling Estonia’s aspirations of pioneering the first borderless e-society”.<sup>83</sup> Since the e-Residency project has become a kind of a revolutionary story inside the success story of e-Estonia, it is interesting to



**To look for what’s excluded helps in understanding what values a community includes.**

observe how it seamlessly allows the bringing together of two totally disparate events, the Estonian Singing Revolution<sup>84</sup> and the launch of the World Wide Web. As one of the stories at the e-Residency blog puts it: it is the year 1991 to which Estonia's "re-birth as a *digital nation* can be traced back".<sup>85</sup>

The core idea of e-Residency is to "offer every world citizen a government-issued digital identity"<sup>86</sup> by which they can "enjoy the government and business services that Estonia has developed since the 1990s".<sup>87</sup> These include the opportunity to establish a company online, online banking services, tax declarations, and the digital signing of documents. The developers and promoters of the e-residency project have conceived it as "a sort of governmental start-up"<sup>88</sup> that challenges "traditional notions of residency, citizenship, territoriality, and globalization".<sup>89</sup> As the information materials on e-Residency put it, the project has been developed "for the new e-Estonian – a new kind of digital and global citizen".<sup>90</sup>

In addition to the open call for potential e-residents, however, the status of an e-resident has also been offered as a gift from the Estonian government to "outstanding people" (e.g. Angela Merkel) during their visits to Estonia, or during Estonian national leaders visits abroad.<sup>91</sup> Since the international media regularly follow the doings of diplomats, national leaders, and IT entrepreneurs, the e-Residency project has clearly played an important role in establishing the signifier e-Estonia in the international media.<sup>92</sup> The first e-Resident was actually a journalist – namely, Edward Lucas, who covers Russia and Eastern Europe for *The Economist* and publicly regards himself as a close friend of Toomas Hendrik Ilves, the former President of Estonia.

### e-Estonia: Always already a former Soviet republic

On the home page of the e-Estonia website<sup>93</sup> one is still greeted by the former president of Estonia, Toomas Hendrik Ilves. While Ilves has undoubtedly been Estonia's most vocal advocate of the empowering role of digital technology in public administration, entrepreneurship, and education during his presidency, it also appears that the very term e-Estonia is his invention.

Ilves served as president of Estonia from 2006 to 2016, but he had also previously served as minister of foreign affairs.<sup>94</sup> So it was in 2000, when Ilves as minister of foreign affairs used the term e-Estonia in the title of his speech *e-Estonia and the New Europe*, held at the London School of Economics. As Ilves put it then: "I chose e-Estonia as a title simply because in the most dynamic area of growth, Estonia far outstrips Western Europe".<sup>95</sup> He argued that, by comparing the relevant statistical data on Internet use, computer owners, and online banking, one can easily observe that Estonia is unjustifiably "a country still called pejoratively a 'former Soviet republic'", and added that, "with the emergence of new technologies and the new economy, the iconic vision of a backward, corrupt Eastern Europe, dismal and grey requires iconoclasm".<sup>96</sup> As he himself remarks, in using the term e-Estonia, he meant to make a reference to the recently launched eEurope initiative of the EU. The aim of eEurope was

to "ensure the European Union fully benefits for generations to come from the changes the Information Society is bringing".<sup>97</sup>

A few months prior to Ilves's speech in London, the Government Office of the Republic of Estonia had launched its "e-government project".<sup>98</sup> The first step of the project was a launch of the information system of government sessions (called the "e-cabinet"). As the press notice put it back then, this system was developed as "a first step towards e-government" that "will eliminate the need to produce 55 copies of document bundles, each with a height of 10–20 cm".<sup>99</sup> From the very beginning, news about this project started to appear in the foreign media, laying the first founding elements of the notion of Estonia as an advanced e-state.<sup>100</sup>

A year later the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (with Ilves as Minister) started to publish a section titled e-Estonia in its publication called "Glance at the Mirror".<sup>101</sup> The e-Estonia section appeared side by side with others such as "Foreign Investments" and "Tourism". All of them were essentially selections of quotes and headlines compiled from the foreign press. The excerpts in the e-Estonia section praised the recently launched (and the world's first) e-government system, and the high proportion of Internet users compared not only to post-Soviet and Eastern European countries but to Western countries as well.

Despite the number of e-services, e-solutions, and devices that have followed the first Estonian e-government program in 2000,<sup>102</sup> the term e-Estonia is now more widely used than ever. It regularly appears in the articles of media outlets such as *The New York Times*, *The Guardian* and *Wired* that propose that Estonia is "the world's most advanced digital society",<sup>103</sup> "the new European start-up hub"<sup>104</sup> or "one of the most tech-savvy countries on earth".<sup>105</sup> While it was almost two decades ago that Ilves argued for the dismantling of the widespread prejudices that perceived post-Soviet, Eastern European, and non-EU states as corrupt and underdeveloped, it is still this very same post-Soviet image that continues to play a crucial role in the currently circulating e-Estonia story. In its new version, however, the post-Soviet image is something that has been successfully left behind – in other words, this new version assumes that Estonia has already become e-Estonia, *despite* its Soviet past. This presumption is well illustrated by the question that is put forth on the e-Estonia website: "How did a small, post-Soviet nation transform itself into a global leader in e-solutions?"<sup>106</sup>

### e-Estonia and post socialism as transition

The heroic overcoming of its "post-Soviet" image or past that e-Estonia appears to represent is pervasive not only in the locally produced promotional materials on e-Estonia<sup>107</sup> but can be observed widely throughout international media coverage.<sup>108</sup> What I call the "logic of postsocialist transition" is one of the main social logics that help us to grasp what makes the e-Estonia discourse tick. The notion of post socialist, transition as such, however, involves a number of relatively strong assumptions about the ways in which social and political change takes place.



Specifically, the term transition pushes one to conceive post-socialism as an intermediate period between the collapse of communism and a decisive move towards capitalism. In studies of postsocialism the idea of a one-way transition has been criticized widely on different grounds.<sup>109</sup> One of the central objections to this “transition” concerns the way this concept collapses the spatial and the temporal by “reducing geographical diversity to a lagging temporality” and represents a particular region as being “on a journey somewhere”.<sup>110</sup> In other words, the idea of postsocialist transition fits comfortably into a framework of modernization theory that starts from the premise that “there is a direction to history”, “that direction can be known”, “we actually know it”, and “that direction of history leads toward, and points to, the ‘West’”.<sup>111</sup>

From a discourse-theoretical perspective, this notion of “transition” can be conceived as the “nodal point” in an explanatory framework that not only “structures and standardizes empirical data” but has “turned into a historiographical signifier, which encompasses a defined period after the fall of communism”.<sup>112</sup> This simplified notion of post socialist transition treats it as a “sutured structure composed of various social experiences and political strategies, which naturalizes and universalizes the contingent power struggles that are taking place and will take place in the future of post-socialist countries”.<sup>113</sup>

In our case, the “logic of transition” helps the discourse of e-Estonia to take the focus away from (and normalize) the contingent power struggles that have lain behind the emergence of the e-Estonia project. Even more importantly, the logic of transition, by intersecting with the logics of nation branding, gives rise to a fantasmatic narrative in which Estonia’s local political struggles, historical burdens, and international image-related concerns are best overcome with the help of digital technology, e-services, and e-solutions. In other words, as long as Estonia is e-Estonia, a technologically advanced e-state or e-society, there is no obstacle that cannot be overcome.

Moreover, the fantasmatic narrative seems to assume that e-Estonia’s various, innovative, revolutionary e-solutions not only help the nation, society, or country to effectively solve its social and political problems, but can even help it to defend itself in situations of cyber war.<sup>114</sup> Furthermore, as the e-Estonia website tells us, it was in 2007 when e-Estonia “really” took off – that was the year that Estonia became “the first nation in history to successfully defend itself against a large-scale cyber attack”.<sup>115</sup>

### e-Estonia: An empty signifier?

As I demonstrated above, it is the social logics of post socialist transition and nation branding that allow us to characterize the signifying logics that govern the e-Estonia discourse. In other

words, these are the main logics that make the e-Estonia discourse tick. In tracing the history of the signifier e-Estonia we also observed that President Ilves initially used the term to argue *against* the label “former Soviet republic” that he claimed had been “pejoratively” applied to Estonia. It seems that the particular signifier e-Estonia appeared then as an effective antidote against “[p]ast preconceptions that form views of the present day ‘Eastern Europe’”,<sup>116</sup> mostly because it allowed emphasis on those aspects of Estonia’s technological and economic development that did not confirm or justify the stereotype of a backward post-Soviet state.

What I would like to do in this last section of the article is

to explore the *political* dimension of the e-Estonia discourse. The political dimension, as I pointed out above, concerns the dislocation of existing social relations “in the name of a principle or ideal”.<sup>117</sup> I propose that the concept of the “empty signifier” as proposed by Laclau allows us to explore the political dimension of e-Estonia as a name. An empty signifier, together with the concept of the floating signifier, belongs to the category of a “general equivalent”. For Laclau, “general equivalents” appear in the process whereby “the body of one particularity assumes a function of universal representation”.<sup>118</sup> Both empty and floating signifiers offer necessary closure for discourses. By acting

as nodal points, they have a central role to play in the formation, maintenance, and contestation of hegemonic projects. While floating signifiers are characterized by their multiple and contrasting meanings in hegemonic discourses, it is the empty signifiers that point to the constitutive power of *naming* in political practice.

**MOST SIMPLY DEFINED**, an empty signifier is “a signifier without a signified”,<sup>119</sup> a “name or a symbol of a lack”<sup>120</sup> that emerges when political actors “struggle to represent a specific sense of fullness and common good”.<sup>121</sup> The logic of empty signifiers can be expressed in three points: they “signify the *universal*”, “they provide a *name* for the chain of equivalences” and they “keep the equivalential chain sequence *indefinitely* open”.<sup>122</sup> Hence, the empty signifier can be characterized by a political logic that privileges “the dimension of equivalence to the point that its differential nature is almost entirely obliterated”.<sup>123</sup> An empty signifier exemplifies “the discursive presence of its own limits”<sup>124</sup> as it tries to escape the relational and differential nature of signification. We can recognize empty signifiers where a particular name becomes “the ground” for a particular discourse,<sup>125</sup> a name that becomes “detached from its *particular meaning* in order to provide an empty space that can be filled with *universal meanings*”.<sup>126</sup> It seems that e-Estonia, as a name, is



**“IT MIGHT BE MORE ACCURATE TO ARGUE THAT, IF THIS POST-SOVIET PAST WERE SOMEHOW COMPLETELY SUPPRESSED, THE STORY OF e-ESTONIA WOULD NOT BE POSSIBLE IN THE FIRST PLACE.”**





precisely an empty signifier that has provided an “empty space” for universal meanings.

First, in contrast with e-democracy and e-government, the signifier e-Estonia might seem relatively limited due to its reference to a particular nation state or a national community.

However, following from the discussion in the first part of the essay, I think it is more accurate to conceive e-government and e-democracy as floating signifiers that were in play among public discourses and competing political projects in the 1990s. If this is the case, then e-Estonia, as it interchangeably refers to nation state or society, appears to be working for the *general interest* of the Estonian society or nation.

Second, as we also showed above, e-Estonia has produced a variety of e-subjects, e-practices, and e-institutions. Moreover, e-Estonia remains open to new subjects and practices. As the e-Estonia website declares: “Even with all of Estonia’s successes, this by no means is the end of the e-Estonia story. It’s only the beginning”.<sup>127</sup> In other words, the equivalential chain that e-Estonia signifies seems to be open indefinitely. However, it also appears that what these subjects, practices, and institutions have in common is only their reference to e-Estonia – i.e., they are made *equivalent* with the universal claims, ideals, and principles of e-Estonia.

Third, even if Estonia is represented as e-Estonia, a “global leader in e-solutions”, it cannot escape its recent postsocialist or post-Soviet past. However, it might be more accurate to argue that if this post-Soviet past were somehow completely suppressed, the story of e-Estonia would not be possible in the first place. For it is on this generalized notion of a post-Soviet past that the success story of e-Estonia has been built. As Taavi Kotka, one of the visionaries behind the e-Residency project, has put it: “After separating from the Soviet Union, Estonia had to start with a clean slate and, as history has shown, a clean slate is the best surface on which to create innovation”.<sup>128</sup> A similar notion appears in the “White Paper on Estonia’s Digital Ideology”.<sup>129</sup> This text, produced by Daniel Vaarik, an Estonian PR guru and a former member of Toomas Hendrik Ilves’s think tank, proposes a number of recommendations in the form of “pathfinder stories”. These stories appear as narrative templates that Estonia should follow to introduce and present itself to “the world”. Drawing on this “digital ideology”, Vaarik has given presentations about e-Estonia’s story at various events.<sup>130</sup> As he puts it in one of his presentations, “suddenly we realized that information technology helps us to show something from our country that is not post-Soviet but future-related [...] Estonia realized that it can get away from a post-Soviet space by starting communication about IT, by doing everything it can, by doing IT reforms”.<sup>131</sup>

In sum, then, e-Estonia as an empty signifier provides a basis

for a variety of existing and emergent hegemonic projects that represent themselves as the ones that are ultimately able to lead the Estonian nation state, society, or country towards a bright future that is yet to come.

## Conclusion

My main aim in this article was to outline a discourse-theoretical framework that allows an alternative reading of the various assumptions, hopes, and promises that make the e-Estonia story possible. First, I discussed the policy research that departs from the concepts of “e-government” and “e-democracy” and analyzes relevant policymaking practices in Estonia from the mid-1990s on. Second, I suggested that, while e-Estonia could be analyzed as an example of an e-government project, we would fail to grasp how it is possible that e-government has become part of e-Estonia, not the other way around. Third, after introducing the ontological premises and defining the key terms of poststructuralist discourse theory, I turned to the logics approach, which that investigates social practices in terms of different types of signifying, or discursive “logics”. Fourth, by following these logics, I offered a discourse-theoretical reading of the notion of e-Estonia.

By pointing out the particular texts where the signifier e-Estonia appears, as well as paying attention to the distinctive forms in which it represented, I turned to the research field of nation branding. I then articulated various concepts and defini-

tions from the field of nation branding research to name the “logic of nation branding”. In order to show how the e-Estonia discourse could be characterized through this “logic of nation branding” I discussed the recent e-Residency project. I then considered the concept of “post socialist transition” and formulated the social “logic of transition” as concept to the way in which the e-Estonia story is pervasively a success story of a former, underdeveloped, post-Soviet state. Also I showed that the term e-Estonia was coined by Foreign Minister Toomas Hendrik Ilves as early

as 2000, and appeared much more powerfully in the mid-2000s when Ilves became president of Estonia. Finally, by drawing on the concept of the empty signifier, I showed that it is the name e-Estonia that is to be seen as what has constituted the space where the notion of Estonia as an advanced e-state or e-society could emerge in the first place.

Finally, I want to emphasize that this article should be considered exploratory. My main aim was to find theoretically grounded ways to offer an alternative reading of the success story that runs throughout the general idea of e-Estonia as well as particular manifestations of this idea. From the discourse-theoretical framework that I presented, this success narrative appears primarily to disclose the hegemonic practices that have constituted e-Estonia. If we add the label “hegemonic” to particular

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discourses, it allows us to describe a situation whereby “through acts of identification, subjects have come to forget the contingency of a particular articulation and have accepted it and its elements as necessary or natural”.<sup>132</sup> This forgetting is clearly what seems to occur with the hegemonic discourse of e-Estonia. Moreover, one faces a serious difficulty if one wants to establish what kind of phenomenon e-Estonia is solely on the basis of policy documents, promotional materials, and media coverage: is it a nation branding project, an imaginary digital nation, an actually existing digital society with its digital infrastructure, a response to the assumed forces of globalization, or a combination of all of these? As I hope to have shown in this paper, a poststructuralist discourse-theoretical approach presents a convincing as well as a constructive way forward in this situation, because it not only asks about the conditions of possibility of particular discourses but does so with a clearly articulated ontological, theoretical, and methodological framework. ✕

Rene Mäe, PhD candidate in sociology, School of Governance, Law, and Society, Tallinn University.

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