

A post-Soviet eco-digital nation? Metonymic processes of nation-building and Estonia's high-tech dreams in the 2010s¹

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On Oct 30, 2019, a Facebook friend posted on his wall: "The future is here." Attached was the image of a poster, announcing the launch of food delivery robots on a university campus: "For your awareness, in the next few days you may see preliminary steps toward the launch of the innovative new on-demand delivery service as the new robotic fleet arrives on campus for technical preparation at the University of Houston."²

The robots newly visible on the walkways of the University of Houston campus, and planned or implemented for 99 other US university campuses, were developed by Starship Technologies and made their debut in Estonia in 2014.³ I encountered a Starship robot most recently in July 2019, at the entrance to Tallinn Technical University, where it welcomed high schoolers who had arrived for a week-long product-design camp *Hüppelaud* ("Springboard"). The participants were greeted by the Estonian president Kersti Kaljulaid, who shared her podium with the Starship robot and encouraged students to think about ethical obligations related to a world newly shared with artificial intelligence.

While Starship robots were fanning out across US university campuses, the Estonian company Cleveron was setting up its Cleveron 401 Pickup Towers in 1600 Walmart stores.⁴ Guardtime, a software company initially developed to defend Estonian digital security, now serves clients including the U.S. military, NATO, and the European Space Agency.⁵ The most celebrated Estonian-born high-tech success story of the 2010s is the international money transfer company Transferwise, launched in 2010 and valued in 2019 at 3.5 billion dollars.⁶

Estonia in the 2010s might offer many surprises for stereotypical understandings of post-Soviet society.⁷ Estonia joined NATO and the European Union in 2004; in 2011 it adopted the euro as its currency. European Commission Report released in 2018 considered Estonia's tax administration

significantly more efficient than EU average.⁸ In the first half of 2019, Estonia, with a population of 1.3 million, had about 650 start-ups.⁹ In the second quarter of 2019, average monthly gross wages and salaries were 1,419 euros, while in the information technology sector, salaries were about 2.5 times higher than the national average.¹⁰ According to the European Commission Country Report Estonia, 2019, “The country is a frontrunner as regards the digital provision of public services and has the highest proportion (96%) of e-Government users in Europe.”¹¹ According to the Centre for European Policy Studies report of Nov 2019, Estonia is no 1 in the EU in readiness for digital learning.¹²

Estonia’s *actual* social and political wellbeing in the post-Soviet era lies somewhat to the side of the main interest of this article, however. The focus here lies instead with the *imaginary* aspect of these things: how did Estonians, in the second decade of the 21st century, imagine themselves as a nation, and what was omitted from this imaginary account? Certainly, there are many ways to imagine a nation, and claims to national coherence can only be made at the expense of leaving some population groups out of consideration. What interests me here, however, is *a canon of national imaginaries*: those ideas about the nation that can be presented within media discourse and in face to face conversations without further explanation, because they have become “common knowledge” or “cultural common ground.” They are shared to such an extent that they are presumed to require no further commentary – one can identify oneself within, but also criticize or ironize or lament such canonical imaginaries. National imaginaries are related, but not equivalent, to party politics; they intermingle and are connected to concepts like civic or ethnic nationalism, but they function at a different ontological level, stretching across semantic boundaries and supporting interpretations in different registers.

The core of canonized understanding about Estonian identity in the 2010s, I will argue, can be articulated as *eco-digital* nationhood.¹³ ‘Eco-digital’ is a rather self-explanatory term involving a combination of ecological and digital values.¹⁴ The ‘eco’ part of this term contains an imaginary link to ancient times: Estonians have, according to this widespread narrative, retained what we might call an *eco-intimacy* – an intimate connection to natural environments.¹⁵ According to this story, Estonians, as *maarahvas* (earth/country-people) or *metsarahvas* (forest-people), have developed in harmony with forces of nature, and when, typically, the modernization and technologization processes broke this ancient bond in other developed nations, Estonians managed to keep their own natural bond intact. While the eco-narrative can be traced back to at least Herder and German romanticism, a digital identity has become linked to the core myth of eco-intimate *maarahvas* over the last two decades; according to the eco-digital narrative, Estonians love and cherish nature, yet are proud to live in a society on the forefront of the digital frontier. As the bestselling author Valdur Mikita has phrased it, “the true Estonian

has Skype in one hand and a small mushroom knife in the other.”¹⁶ An eco-digital identity is both formative internally and presented externally as the official image of the nation: tellingly, the Estonian.ee webpage opens with an image of young people with laptops at the seashore.¹⁷

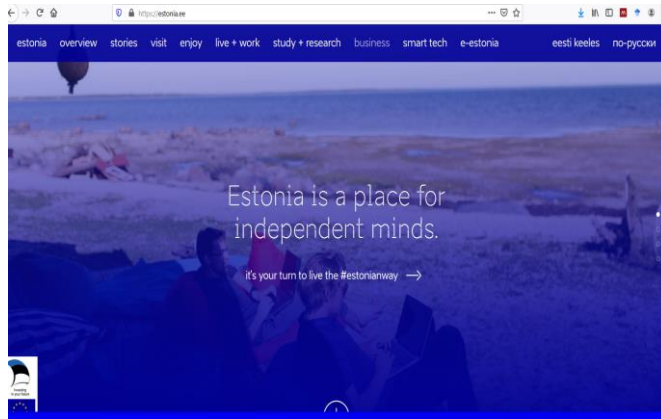


Image 1. The Estonian.ee webpage: Estonia is a place for independent minds with laptops on the seashore.

A certain semiotic tension is inscribed into the notion of the eco-digital, stemming from the centuries-long view of nature and technology as opposed to each other. It would seem “natural” to imagine the forester and the programmer occupying different ends of the spectrum of modes of being, one spending days outside, among tangible natural surroundings, the other developing intangible electronic loops, chains, and linkages in cyberspace. Yet such schematic oppositions have lost much of their force in twenty-first-century Estonia.

From another perspective, the oxymoronic accretions of the eco-digital can be acknowledged exactly as *both* an impossibility *and* an actual cultural phenomenon, the seeming incompatibility of the term with itself operates as part of its allure. As with all identificatory narrative clusters, the combination of the ‘eco’ and the ‘digital’ is unstable and malleable: its manifestations can provide varying relations of its key terms. Both narratives are tied to the devotions of the national education system: the Estonian school curriculum draws significantly on environmental topics, and digital literacy is likewise valued and emphasized in schools.¹⁸ They are malleable also in the sense that the eco-digital narrative can be exploited by different political powers: the digital success story fits comfortably within the neoliberal political worldview and the eco-narrative commands the support of not only the Estonian Greens, but also the populist right-wing parties such as the Conservative People's Party of Estonia, EKRE. However, the question of party politics will remain outside of the main focus of this investigation.

In this article I study structures of identification and follow some well-known cases of identity construction in Estonia of the 2010s, in order to articulate and critically analyze versions of the eco-digital narrative.¹⁹ I will also raise the question of what might be left out in such an account – sociocultural realities rendered effectively invisible or silent in the context of eco-digital imaginaries.

Considering only cultural dominants and not the full, broad spectrum of cultural sentiment, Estonia's cultural changes after the collapse of the Soviet Union until the end of the 2010s can be conceptualized as moving from decolonial restorative nationhood toward eco-digital nationhood. In the 1980s, the popular mood among Estonian-speakers included anxiety over the national future under what was commonly understood as "Russian rule," with its heavy Russophone immigration and the deepening penetration of Russian language use into everyday life. In reaction, by the late 1980s and early 1990s, the prevailing political sentiment among this population might be broadly described as decolonial.²⁰ In politics, the decolonial discourse of the restoration of the pre-Soviet Estonian republic prevailed and motivated the exclusion of Soviet-era settlers from automatic citizenship in the new republic; in the broader sphere of cultural imaginaries, decoloniality in the 1990s came to include a wide array of different sentiments with a strong emphasis on "catching up with the West." By the 2010s, the decolonial impulse had run its course, prevailing public moods and imaginaries had shifted significantly, and decolonial ideas were largely displaced by an eco-digital discourse that focused on successes, while overlooking its persisting Soviet material, cultural and demographic heritage (with the predictable result in evidence by the end of the decade: marginalized elements of society became susceptible to populist political appeals).

In order to unravel the logic of national identity-making in more detail, we need to start from the question of the gaze – who is looking, who is seeing, and how is the gaze formed? What are the grounding structures of identity creation in the 2010s Estonia? Here, I am moving in a direction opposite from that of Michael Herzfeld's concept of national intimacy:²¹ while Herzfeld suggests that a good part of national existence remains hidden from a foreigner's eye, I am interested how a foreign gaze *conditions* national self-perception: how national discourses present the nation as *being seen* by outsiders, and how this sense of being seen becomes part of not just how a given culture will exhibit itself before the eyes of foreigners, but also part of that culture's innermost layers of self-understanding – and how such structures take us back to the impulses and narratives of Enlightenment.

1. Constructing Otherness: Orientalizing discourses and the returned gaze

One often hears claims that former Socialist bloc countries are sometimes objects of Western 'othering'. According to the Polish scholar Dorota Kołodziejczyk, the encounter between Eastern and Western Europe "brings for the Westerner a feeling of anxiety and discomfort" and "obscure dreams of Orientalist type", and "for the Easterner a sense of being misunderstood, underappreciated, unacknowledged."²² Larry Wolff has traced the Orientalist association in regards to Eastern Europe back to the Enlightenment era, when "the east of Europe" – in French *l'orient de l'Europe* – could easily be read as "the Orient of Europe". "As late as the eve of World War I, French scholarship still alternated between two seemingly similar terms, *l'Europe orientale* (Eastern Europe) and *l'Orient européen* (the European Orient)," observes Wolff.²³ Wolff, Kołodziejczyk and many other scholars find inspiration from Edward Said's work, and make use of Said's concept of Orientalism to describe Western European attitudes toward the eastern parts of Europe. In Milica Bakić-Hayden's words: "eastern Europe has been commonly associated with 'backwardness,' the Balkans with 'violence,' India with 'idealism' or 'mysticism,' while the west has identified itself consistently with the "civilized world."²⁴ Benedikts Kalnačs has in the Baltic context referred to its positioning as "Europe's internal others,"²⁵ Johannes Saar has regarded the Balts as "Orientalized with a peculiar 'boreal' twist."²⁶

Orientalizing models have indeed varied over time and in relation to different regions. Merje Kuus suggests that debates around the EU and NATO enlargement of the late 1990s and early 2000s were, again, "underpinned by a broadly orientalist discourse that assumes essential difference between Europe and Eastern Europe."²⁷ Kuus points to the fluidity and flexibility of the concept of Eastern Europe: the expansion of NATO and the EU supported new divisions and distinctions, thus creating a sociopolitical landscape with "varying degrees of Europeanness and Eastness."²⁸ In a similar mode, Bakić-Hayden investigates what she calls "nested orientalism", that is, reproduction of Orientalizing attitudes at the local level:

Yugoslavs who reside in areas that were formerly the Habsburg monarchy distinguish themselves from those in areas formerly ruled by the Ottoman Empire, hence "improper." Within the latter area, eastern Orthodox peoples perceive themselves as more European than those who assumed identities of European Muslims and who further distinguish themselves from the ultimate orientals, non-Europeans.²⁹

While many important works describing such processes were published in the 1990s and early 2000s, recent scholarship has confirmed the continuing operation of orientalizing discourses and the

accompanying sense of inferiority among those nations who do not feel themselves securely included as part of (western) Europe. In Madina Tlostanova's phrasing, "the progressivist paradigm has had an in-built feature of always keeping a sufficient lag between the modernizing catching-up ex-Socialists and the first-rate Western/Northern subjects."³⁰ Confirmatory case-studies abound; Tamás Kiss, for example, investigates the efforts of Romanian elites to escape Balkanism, constructed by western observers, which "has profoundly shaped the self-perceptions of those involved, leading to a pronounced, persistent sense of inferiority among those living in this region."³¹ Dorota Kołodziejczyk, similarly, discusses the impact of Orientalism, referring to "a self-Orientalizing vision of the returned gaze," as "Eastern Europeans see themselves *being seen* by Western Europeans."³²

The imaginary Western gaze is certainly an important factor in the self-perception of the former Soviet bloc – or at least of its European parts. Here, we enter a much-explored research area: in psychoanalytic theory, the location of something like one's own authentic wishes and strivings tends to be considered illusory, for the reason that desire always re-echoes the desires of others. It follows that the sense of the self as a subject – or as a collective subject – is created through others, through looking and imitating, reproducing on the basis of what is seen, sensed, and encountered. In (post)colonial studies, the returned gaze is related to the question of cultural self-subordination: one of the most damaging aspects of colonialism can be the development of feelings of cultural secondariness and unworthiness. The colonizer's vision of the subordinated culture gets internalized as the self-image adopted by the colonized themselves, so that the latter strives to become as similar as possible to the former, in order to elevate both social standards and self-esteem.³³

We can describe such processes, such exchanges of evaluative gazes in the larger context of an ever-continuing project of Enlightenment, a process that has periodically come in for harsh criticism, yet even more often has been pursued in sincere earnestness. In European history, striving toward some definition of progress has historically merged with colonial conquests, so that it has become impossible to separate the imperial desire for new territories from the missionary zeal to spread values and beliefs that are regarded as progressive by the colonizing entity. One such variation on 'Enlightenment coloniality' was at work in the twentieth-century Soviet Union: in the Baltic case, Soviet annexation was accompanied by discourse describing the great Russian nation stretching out its helping hand to those in need. According to this hegemonic discourse, the Baltic states had to catch up and learn from the Russians, in order to follow a more enlightened (in this case, communist) path of social development.³⁴ In the Soviet era, Soviet Enlightenment discourse promised new and better life to those struggling under the exploitation of the bourgeoisie; in the post-Soviet years, Western experts rushed in to enlighten the

post-Soviet zone (about, as Marx would perhaps say, how to re-establish the dictatorship of capital – but also about how to build a civic society). The aims and strategies of enlightenment will vary and change; these are sometimes supported by colonial matrices of power, other times orientalizing techniques are at work without the establishment of colonial rule. When the ‘natives’ are not consulted about the terms of their enlightenment, and ‘progress’ is backed by military force, this falls under the category of ‘colonialism’. Othering from a higher position on the imaginary ladder of civilizations, but without significant violence and oppressive military control, can be interpreted as ‘orientalization’ – something we see often enough in relation to the former Eastern bloc countries.³⁵

Judgments of the ‘Western gaze’ were certainly also experienced acutely in Estonia of the 2010s: the local media often relayed Estonia’s media coverage from elsewhere, and various EU, World Bank, OECD and other reports were eagerly read and commented upon. Yet, in Estonia’s case, the returned gaze did not, in mainstream discursive fields of the 2010s, promote discourses of self-orientalization and secondariness. Rather, as the local media reported the positive coverage of Estonia’s achievements in various Western sources, the imaginary Western gaze reinforced Estonian self-identity in positive ways. While praise was taken as a support for local self-esteem, critique was easily attributed to ignorance: unhappy findings were supplemented by local expert opinion pointing to mistakes typical of long distance judgments.³⁶ The function of Western approval is, in this context, both ideological and pragmatic: the judgment impacts communal self-esteem, but it also operates as a condition for prospective economic investment.

The non-orientalizing, positive role of the Western gaze in Estonia’s self-identification can be attributed to several factors already mentioned: Estonia’s success in establishing a corruption-free and effective state apparatus, their relatively strong economic results as compared to other post-Soviet states, and, most of all, the highly successful “digital turn” which has received plenty of positive international attention. Other factors contributed less directly: the small size of the Estonian population and the fact that the Estonian economic migration was directed northward (to Finland), not so much westward, so that Estonians played little role in British and Germans imaginaries of Eastern European migrant workers. Thus it came about that the principle appearance of Estonia in the Western press during the 2010s had to do with Estonia’s digital achievements. The titles of these articles suggest their general tenor: Welcome to E-stonia, the world's most digitally advanced society; Lessons from the most digitally advanced country in the world; Wo Estland Deutschland abhängt; L’Estonie – royaume du toute tout-numérique.³⁷

Let's look at one well-known example of 'Western' press coverage of Estonia here: a 7600-word article by Nathan Heller, entitled "Estonia, the Digital Republic," published in *The New Yorker*, in December, 2017.³⁸ In this essay – which was also summarized in Estonian media – the journalist has brought different aspects of digital Estonia narrative together, with a great deal of colour and detail. This article serves us well to introduce the general structure of the digital Estonia narrative.

2. The narrative of eco-DIGITAL Estonia

The *New Yorker* article opens in terms of breathless hyperbole: "Its government is virtual, borderless, blockchained, and secure. Has this tiny post-Soviet nation found the way of the future?"³⁹ The readers are then regaled with a detailed account of 'e-Estonia' which is described as

the most ambitious project in technological statecraft today, for it includes all members of the government, and alters citizens' daily lives. The normal services that government is involved with—legislation, voting, education, justice, health care, banking, taxes, policing, and so on—have been digitally linked across one platform, wiring up the nation.⁴⁰

The journalist interviews both the engineers of the platform and some of its users and has medical doctors explain at length the functioning of the platform in the health care system. Heller also visits the NATO Cooperative Cyber Defense Center of Excellence, a think tank and training facility (established after Russia's 2007 cyberattack on Estonia), the goal of which, we are told, is "to guide other NATO nations toward vigilance."⁴¹ Toomas Ilves, Estonia's former President (presently a fellow at Stanford) is quoted as being shocked at the retrograde U.S. bureaucracy: "It's like the nineteen-fifties – I had to provide an electrical bill to prove I live here!" he exclaimed.⁴²

And this is what we hear about the E.U. Digital Summit, held in Tallinn in 2017. Kersti Kaljulaid, the President of Estonia, presents herself as the "President to a digital society" and earns hearty approval from the other leaders of the European states; during her speech, Emmanuel Macron is reported as "nodding vigorously," and Merkel declares afterwards, "You're so much further than we are."⁴³

The article ends with the journalist's declaration that what the U.S. has done wrong, Estonia has done right: "the U.S. had taken one path – personalization, anonymity, information privatization, and competitive efficiency – while Estonia had taken the other" – that of building a digital society.⁴⁴

According to this narrative, Estonia's story is of a great success, driven by cool ideas, youthful energy, and people's passionate desire for improving their society. It is mentioned that Estonians created Skype and that Estonia supports a flourishing start-up culture. Estonia is also presented as a space for "communalism and the spirit of creative unruleness." Instead of submitting passively to the orientaling gaze, Estonians themselves, we understand, feel an obligation to enlighten the rest of Europe and the NATO countries.

Heller's article is thus rather typical in its tone and its equation of digitally advanced society with a successful and highly developed version of statehood. In this interpretive model, there is no place for self-orientalization and the feeling of otherness. The Enlightenment narrative has been reversed: Estonia's goal is "to guide other NATO nations towards vigilance," to lead the way in turning the rest of the EU toward more advanced practices of a digital commonwealth. Such writings by foreign reporters, as they are reported back in Estonian newspapers and social media, through their emphasis on digital achievements, e-government, and a flourishing start-up culture, accumulate to form the sense of a *developed, digitally enlightened nation*, acknowledged as such by other states and nations. International approval – being regarded as a digital nation in the eyes of others – fosters a national self-image of living in a 'digiriik', a digital state (literally, digi-state) – as it is commonly referred to in Estonian.

In addition to endless discussions of *digiriik* in media and internet sources, oral interviews performed by Kerstin Mahlapuu testify to the widespread adoption of the *digiriik*-identity. Mahlapuu writes:

The interview data also revealed the image of an E-stonia as the most effective factor for introducing Estonia to the world. [...] The IT aspect along with other but related nation-branding elements were referred to by respondents of various backgrounds, ages and genders demonstrating how deeply this dimension has been internalised in Estonia."⁴⁵

In the words of one enthusiastic interviewee: "For example I think that the E-stonia is really cool (*kihvt*). Kind of brings forward our essence!"⁴⁶

Digiriik offers a civic identity, unrelated to questions of ethnic belonging, and as such provides a solid platform for developing an open and ethnically inclusive civic society. Yet *digiriik* is just one component of Estonian identity narratives – the other major identificatory cluster being formed on the basis of belonging together with land, soil, forests, sea – that is, with local environments. Even though the *digiriik*-narrative is the exclusive topic of many articles and discussions, it can also be presented side by side with *eco*-narratives. For the attentive eye, even the *New Yorker* article on Estonia's digital success

unfolds as an *eco-digital narrative*. The text makes multiple references to natural surroundings, revealing the digital success story as unfolding in real physical spaces, surrounded by natural landscapes. The opening sentence positions the setting as by the sea: “Up the Estonian coast, a five-lane highway bends with the path of the sea;” a few lines later, trees are added as tracing the highway. Wind brings in “a thick fog from the water,” seagulls screech, “silver-birch leaves shimmer like chimes.” Half of Estonia is covered with forests, we hear, and the poet Jaan Kaplinski’s lines about “luminous landscape” are cited with a sense of approval. The narrative includes not only serious truth-claims, but also autochthonic imagery which connects startup culture with the local soil: “Previously, Estonia’s best-known industry was logging, but Skype was built there using mostly local engineers, and countless other startups have sprung from its soil.” The combination of the ecological and the digital emerges in the article most clearly in the section about the start-up *ÖÖD*⁴⁷ – the products and self-presentation of this company will serve us to move the focus of this essay from *eco-digital* to *eco-digital*, and to reveal the unstable foundations of *eco-digital* dreams.

3. The glass cube in the middle of pristine nature – the ECO-digital narrative

According to the *New Yorker* article, the company *ÖÖD* “makes one-room, two-hundred-square-foot huts that you can order prefab.”⁴⁸ According to its own claims, this company will “drop into the countryside,” wherever one wants it, a room-size mini-dwelling with all the modern comforts: the 18 m² cubicle is fully furnished, it includes a shower and a toilet, a climate control, a refrigerator and a stove. The *ÖÖD* people present this as a pod of enhanced human comfort in the heart of nature itself; in the words of Kaspar Kägu, the head of *ÖÖD* sales:

“Sometimes you want something small, but you don’t want to be in a tent [...]. You want a shower in the morning and your coffee and a beautiful landscape. Fifty-two per cent of Estonia is covered by forestland, and we’re rather introverted people, so we want to be—uh, *not* near everybody else.”⁴⁹



Image 2. The ÖÖD Mirror House <https://www.oodhouse.com/>

What is special about the ÖÖD abodes is the reflective glass walls, which makes the mini-dwelling reflect the surrounding landscape. The house as an erasure, an invisible house which does not disrupt the landscape, yet which nevertheless provides climate control, shower, and warm coffee – this could well serve as a *concentrated symbol of the eco-digital dream*. For brothers Jaak and Andreas Tiik, the owners of ÖÖD, their dwelling exemplifies “the idea of a future, where modern small living spaces connect people with nature and their surroundings again.”⁵⁰ The company’s skillfully designed webpage provides a glimpse into the ÖÖD-imaginary of a harmonious living: the webpage opens with a camera gliding towards the reflective house, hardly visible in the middle of beautiful marshlands, and then moves on to follow a young woman surfing gracefully on the water, reaching the shore, and then stepping with her surfboard towards the house, past a small igloo-sauna (also a successful Estonian design project), to later join a group of friends around the fire, by the water, one of them playing a guitar.⁵¹ Such images surely make the ÖÖD house alluring for many, but, for the majority of Estonians, this miniature glass abode is priced well out of reach. The ÖÖD message is not just about the promise of unity with nature, but about the promise of such unity for the most successful members of eco-digital society.

There is another paradox embedded in the ÖÖD-glass house: it is *as if* you are in the middle of nature, but actually you are separated from it by a glass wall. Sure, you can leave the house and go outside, but the whole point of glass walls is to create possibilities for fully enjoying nature from within an enclosed space of comfort. This is one of the *core paradoxes of the eco-digital era* – technological advancements facilitate processes that *turn natural environments into spectacle*, something that might be comfortably enjoyed from a climate-controlled, pest-free room. Nature photography and nature-documentaries offer another case in point; the fully digital version of eco-intimacy is safely guaranteed in the pleasure of enjoying nature on the screen. Indeed, new technologies can produce environmental experiences of an extraordinary kind: in 2018, unexpectedly large audiences – 41,000 people in tiny

Estonia – visited movie theatres to see a new documentary about Estonian wildlife, *Tuulte tahatud maa* (A Wind-Sculpted Land), a film whose list of characters includes moose, mink, otter, wild pigs, swans, frogs, birds, spiders, fish – and not a single human being.⁵² The camera lens created a special, digital “eco-intimacy”: one could, for example, admire a closeup of a moose’s ear, eye, or nose, filling the entire screen. The most advanced technology provided viewers with close encounters with nonhuman, non-domesticated living beings, such as would be impossible to realize in the flesh. As the critic Peeter Laurits remarked, “filming nature has nowadays become a highly technical field... Honestly, I don’t know how this team has managed, while encumbered with such colossal technical equipment, to dive into such an intimate sense of nature and make this graspable for the viewers.”⁵³

Another version of eco-digital innovation includes technologically supported mini gardening within one’s homely comfort zone – take, for example, the company Click & Grow, which started on Hiiumaa island and now sells its presumably self-sustaining smart indoor gardens mostly in the USA and Asia. A 2014 newspaper article declares that these gardens operate on technology that could feed whole cities in the future – the article about their move to Dubai carried the title “Estonian company will create oases in the desert.”⁵⁴

Staying inside a glass house situated in pristine nature, watching nature documentaries on a big screen, growing plants in indoor gardens – all such combinations of technology and nature produce rather ambiguous results. Is such *eco-ambiguity*, which expresses a longing to encounter non-human life-worlds without leaving one’s own comfort zone, a dominant mode of eco-digital identities? Not necessarily – the eco and the digital can also function as *two alternating registers or modes of selfhood*, to be switched according to one’s moods, desires, or possibilities. As we have earlier already investigated the digital side of this story, it is fair to linger briefly on the ecological side of Estonian identity narratives.

4. The eco-side

“For of the forest you are, and to the forest you shall return,” writes the science journalist Tiit Kändler, paraphrasing the biblical saying with a twist, but also gesturing to the mythical dimensions of forest-related discussions in the Estonian public space.⁵⁵ In public and social media, one of the most dominant manifestations of the eco-narrative has been the environmentalist critique of Estonia’s state forestry policy and of forest-cutting in general. Asko Lõhmus’s review articles refer to about 120 popular articles written on these topics from late 2016 to August 2019.⁵⁶

Reactions have also reached the sphere of popular entertainment: the well-received Estonian family film *Eia jõulud Tondikakul* (*Eia’s Christmas on Tondikaku farm*, 2018, directed by Anu Aun), for

example, takes a 10-year-old girl to an Estonian farm, where she becomes involved in saving the primeval forest. Indeed, the topic of deforestation has become one of the central issues in national imaginaries, joined by other environmental topics, such as the ecological implications of the construction of Rail Baltica, a high-speed railway that will connect the Baltics with Central Europe. To sum up, in Linda Kaljundi's words (from 2018): "If one had to name one keyword that in recent years has most excited public opinion, it might very well be 'environment.'"⁵⁷

While many Estonians have voiced their opinions on environmental matters,⁵⁸ the eco-narrative has in the 2010s been most fully articulated by Valdur Mikita. Mikita's essayistic-poetic books⁵⁹ have topped the bestseller lists for several years; the weekly *Eesti Ekspress* designated him a cult writer in 2014,⁶⁰ a position that he still held in 2019. Mikita, with a BA in biology and PhD in semiotics, has received praise as both a postmodern thinker and a true voice of Estonianness.⁶¹ In his account of Estonian or Finno-Ugrian or Baltic Finnic or Nordic particularism,⁶² "old Europe" has evidently lost its ancient bond between nature and people, whereas Estonians have sustained their culture of eco-intimacy. As a different essayist elaborated upon this widely shared line of thinking, Estonians have "to some extent retained the indigenous mentality of the Finno-Ugrian," but, as for "the connection with soil, water and forest – you cannot see this much in 'old' Europe anymore."⁶³ Mikita goes further, suggesting that a particular unity of nature, language and culture is found in Estonia: "Estonian particularity consists in its proximity of culture and nature, in its unity of language and nature."⁶⁴

Valdur Mikita foregrounds local or Baltic Finnic traditions as unique and as related to the still existing deep forestation of these areas – Mikita's model regards environmental intimacy as geographically determined, open for inhabitants of the temperate zone.⁶⁵ His narrative of Estonian-Baltic-Finnic particularism, is, of course, easy to deconstruct. The ethnic particularism, however, is not the core of eco-intimacy as imaginary. The imaginary functions also as a transnational one, domesticated from Rousseau's equation of nature and virtue, from German romanticism, and from the prevailing mood of the late 2010s and their global environmental causes. Despite its geographical determinism and essentializing attitudes, this narrative has proven resistant to critique, since it dovetails so neatly into present-day environmental critiques of Western culture – see, for example, Timothy Morton's widely popular diagnoses of the damaging impact of "agrilogistics."⁶⁶

Mikita's popularity stems from his masterful attunement, amplification, and development of already-existing public moods and currents of thought in the 2010s. His eco-narrative is partially also an eco-digital narrative; Mikita argues for a necessary balance between Europeanness and local Baltic-Finnic traditions. For example, he emphasizes the ability of Estonians to switch from the 'eco'-register to the

digital world: in his imagery, an Estonian man digs his garden on Mondays and mines his bitcoins on Tuesdays and knows both how to code and how to shoe a horse.⁶⁷ The eco-narrative of course includes its own ambiguities and internal tensions: in Estonia, a strongly developed environmental consciousness has not unfailingly produced environmentally friendly practices. Also, history is replete with autochthonic national narratives lending support to reactionary, ethnocentrist (sometimes racist) attitudes, and one can see that a supposed essential bond of a people to its place might be especially seductive or meaningful for those who feel they have not found a place for themselves in the digital success story of their nation.



Image 3. Eco-intimacy. The cover of the “Ecovisions” issue of the journal Vikerkaar. Cover image: O Peixe, 2016. Jonathas de Andrade. Still image of video, 37 minutes, 16mm transferred to 2k.

5. Blind spots in the eco-digital vision

Let us return to the *Ööd* reflective glass house. This abode seems to me a good metaphor for the eco-digital narrative of Estonia: an aesthetically pleasing hypermodern construction, as if gently lowered down to earth, into the middle of a beautiful pristine landscape. Yet this glass abode offers suspicious minds an easy track for deconstructive thinking: really, can one just drop a glass cube into the middle of the forest and start taking a shower there? One can follow this narrative through a short video in the *Ööd* website: a truck arrives, carrying the glass cube, and the crane sets it on the desired spot.⁶⁸ Yet where exactly does water for the shower come from and where does it go?⁶⁹ Solar panels are not

included – so where does the electricity come from? The *Õöd* website gives some explanations: the mounting of the tiny home can indeed happen rather quickly... given that the buyer has already set up a base and arranged for the necessary utility infrastructure.

Now things get back ‘down to earth’: modern comforts rest upon a foundation, a whole network that would connect the house with previous and parallel layers of humanity through electrical wiring, water and waste conduits, and recycling networks. The eco-digital narrative presents Estonia in a similar ‘lowered gently to earth’ manner, overwriting both recent sociohistorical layers and currently discordant aspects of Estonian society.

European Commission Country Reports, for example, judge Estonia in the late 2010s as suffering many symptoms of concern: income inequality is relatively high, poverty risks for old people and the unemployed is high – and increasing, since the social safety net is in some important respects inadequate.⁷⁰ “Relatively low spending on social protection and the limited capacity of the tax and benefit system to redistribute wealth may explain the high income inequality,” in one report’s summary.⁷¹ The gender pay-gap is reported as high and productivity growth as weak. Unmet need for medical care is apparently the highest in the EU, due to long wait times.⁷² Nor was Estonia on track to create a recycling economy, either. Local inhabitants could have listed many additional social problems in need of remedy, some inherited from the Soviet era, some related to post-Soviet neoliberal policies, some to transnational trends: the persisting polarization of society into Estonian- and Russian-speakers, the accumulation of capital and population in Tallinn, the emptying of the borderlands, poor financing of education and the research sector, shortages of doctors, teachers, high-skilled workers; unsustainable energy production from oil shale (which has slowed down only in 2019, due to raising costs of CO2 quota); ugly racial prejudices.

The discrepancy between its eco-digital imaginary and its many persisting problems on the ground points to *selective (self-)representative strategies in Estonia’s narratives of national success*. Nation-building emerges as a *metonymic process*, wherein certain parts of culture are foregrounded to represent the whole. Estonia’s dominant, eco-digital national model of the 2010s is *produced by an aesthetic screening*, supported by a Western gaze adapted for local purposes of positive identity-creation. In this screening process, dissonant aspects of the past – for example, complications of the Soviet heritage, material, demographic, social, psychological – are simply omitted, leaving the eco-digital nation hanging in the present moment like a glass cubicle lowered gently to earth.

The gaze issuing from the Western other, the gaze directed back at the Western other, construction of the Other as a scrutinizing mirror – all this is part of this metonymical selection; the

Western gaze that sees, judges, and admires becomes part of the national self-image; and this self-image becomes reflected back through the Western gaze, entering into a circular process of mirroring the reciprocal, selective gazes.

6. The aesthetics and metaphysics of the Soviet vestigial

But *is* the Soviet past simply left out? The material presence of the Soviet past is too real and too abundantly *there* to be simply overlooked, and eco-digital value-systems are forced periodically to face up to the existence of Soviet-era artefacts and relate to them in one way or another. What happens when the *ecodigital gaze* looks around in *actual physical spaces* dating back to the Soviet era? Certainly, such a gaze is free of nostalgia. It is also free of moral judgement and the sense of obligation or responsibility, and it tends to be unburdened of the Soviet past as an emotionally charged lived experience. For the ecodigital gaze, the Soviet vestigial unfolds in the pragmatic or aesthetic register, as (1) potentially transformable, for example, something assimilable into Soviet chic or else simply re-functionalized; (2) an impurity and disturbance that calls for erasure from the national landscapes as soon as possible, or, (3) reconceptualized in an aesthetic register. The contrast with the 1990s is striking: in the 1990s, Soviet military bases (to pick one example) carried a strong negative affective weight as signifiers of colonial oppression, yet by the 2010s the emotional charge had dissipated and these sites found new life as *cultural heritage*. Some of these sites became protected under the Heritage Conservation Act, and efforts were made to document, restore and conserve amateur art from the military bases.⁷³



Image 4. Restoring a mural in the naval base in Naissaare island, Estonia. Photo: Estonian Academy of Arts

Yet many Soviet vestigial landscapes (with their accompanying modes of living) are simply erased from national topography, too forgotten even to be demolished. Here, Svetlana Boym's concept of the off-modern is well in place: these are places that are, so to speak, forgotten out of existence, off the main paths, the left-overs of modernity, the "side alleys" of modern society.⁷⁴



Image 5. Somebody still lives there. Off-modern sites near Haapsalu. Photo: Epp Annus

Especially fascinating is the third category or mode of dealing with Soviet-era artefacts: reconceptualizing, or perhaps more simply *re-sensing* the Soviet vestigial in an aesthetic register, performed by a gaze devoid of material interest. The vestigial is, through this gaze, separated from the field of praxis into that of aesthetics: use-value loses its significance, time slows down, the gaze wanders, and what was formerly an object with a specific functionality turns into simply a sensescape. If there exist political spaces in Jacques Rancière's sense, in which a certain organization of things and relations has lost its force, leaving a space for new potentialities and a new organization of relations – then we might look for it in these slowly decaying sites and constructions, scattered here and there across the post-Soviet landscapes. Yet these spaces, inhabited by layers of memory, but in partial, incomplete, odd-fitting ways, nurture pure potentiality in its total uselessness – at least for a country that imagines itself as the digital paradise.

"Ruins give us a shock of vanishing materiality," writes Svetlana Boym.⁷⁵ There is a specific appeal in the sensation of lost wholeness. The thrownness, the decay, the open "renunciation of the idea

of harmonious totality,” to borrow Benjamin’s phrase,⁷⁶ causes the wanderer to sense these sites also in a metaphysical register, not perhaps as a shock, but as a deep, lingering, melancholic sensation – the sensation of the crumbling potential of death and decay hidden in the very everydayness of human efforts, however these be framed, whether as eco-digital, or socialist, or in any other ways.

Conclusion: changing imaginaries?

When I first articulated the concept of eco-digital nationhood for a conference in early 2018, I ended in a mode of caution, outlining both positive and negative aspects of eco-digital imaginaries. The eco-digital national narrative has certainly strengthened the sense of national agency in Estonia. Yet this narrative has been able to express only part of the social plurality of life in Estonia. These narrative modes operate by way of a metonymic principle, where only certain aspects of the larger sphere of social plurality are represented. The danger, as I said then, was that an embrace of life in a digital euphoria might leave actual social problems unaddressed.

In the 2019 Estonian parliamentary elections, the anti-immigration and euroskeptical Conservative People's Party of Estonia (EKRE) gained 17.8 % of the vote and won five (of fifteen) cabinet positions. In 2019, the election of EKRE to positions of national power produced an abundance of fraught commentary on the dark future of the nation, with special reference to the Western gaze. One heard expressions of distress that Estonia might lose the high esteem it enjoys in the Western world as a consequence of one or another EKRE scandal. At first glance this might suggest that the 2019 parliamentary elections marked the beginning of a new era in Estonia’s national imagination: even though EKRE’s platform conforms to the eco-side of the eco-digital national narrative, EKRE leaders have voiced skepticism about the human causes of the climate change.⁷⁷ More than anything else, however, the upset caused by the rise of EKRE pertains to the imaginary gaze of the West and the possible loss of Western approval which forms, as this article has demonstrated, a foundation for Estonia’s positive national self-esteem.

Certainly, the inclusion of EKRE in the government shook Estonia’s self-confidence in its imaginary mission as a herald to Europe and the rest of world. Yet, as events transpired, the rise of EKRE in 2019 unfolded in the register of comedy, not tragedy. There has indeed been a shift in Estonia’s public mood, but in 2019, the eco-digital imaginary remained very much in place. During its first months of rule, the EKRE wing of the present coalition government exposed a comic degree of incompetence and

confusion, but its efforts towards more restrictive policies stumbled against multi-leveled opposition and the pressure of popular opinion subdued its climate skepticism.⁷⁸

Thus, after initial post-election turmoil, the eco-digital narrative regained much of its ground. When the Estonian media asked well-connected Estonian politicians and businessmen, in 2019, whether they see a change of attitudes among Westerners, their answer has been “no”.⁷⁹ As political commentators Tõnis Saarts and Tarmo Jüristo observed on a popular TV show of Dec 18, 2019, the rise of EKRE in some ways confirms Estonia’s Europeanness, since the participation of right wing parties in governing coalitions has become a new norm in Europe.⁸⁰ Indeed, foreign coverage of EKRE actions in 2019 tended to emphasize Estonia’s fight *against* the far right members of its cabinet, while negative stories placed emphasis not on Estonia’s failures, but on the more general sociopolitical situation in Europe or in the Baltics.⁸¹

The more substantial change in Estonian national imaginaries in 2019, I would suggest, arrived not by way of EKRE, but by way of Greta Thunberg. The rise of environmental thought and growing environmental awareness revealed to Estonians the insufficiency or backwardness of many common practices and policies in relation to climate change. The year 2019 witnessed more committed, more energetic, and more expansive discussions about environmental urgencies. According to a poll of October, 2019, seventy per cent of Estonians supported the government-approved aim to achieve climate neutrality by 2050.⁸² In September 2019, thirty-three Estonian technology companies signed a Tech Green Pledge (*Roheline lubadus*) – an agreement to make their companies completely climate neutral by 2030.⁸³

The year 2019 inaugurated a redefinition and re-conceptualization of what it might mean to be an eco-digital nation, and it rallied its eco-narratives toward the practical necessities of sustainable action. Over the next decade, an eco-digital Estonia might after all consolidate the transformation of its national imaginary to an ecologically conscious and digitally advanced set of shared practices. Yet the modes, strategies and possibilities of the digital and the environmental efforts will surely remain varied and diverse.

¹ Ideas developed in this article were first presented at the conference *Contested Bodies: Identities and Spaces in Post-Soviet Territories*, University of Pennsylvania, March, 2018, and subsequently at the following events: *Olgem eurooplased, aga saagem ka eestlasteks! Dialoogid Eestiga*, Centre of Excellence in Estonian Studies, Rakvere, April, 2018; *13th Conference on Baltic Studies in Europe*, University of Gdańsk, June, 2019; and *The Fourth Annual Tartu Conference on Russian and East European Studies*, University of Tartu, June, 2019. I thank the organizers of these

events and Veronica Aplenc, Kevin Platt, Serguei Oushakine, Marin Laak, Pertti Joenniemi, Kaarel Piirimäe, Rein Taagepera and Viacheslav Morozov for their comments, as well as the anonymous reviewers of the article. I also thank Neringa Klumbyte for her enthusiasm and Alexey Golubev for his sense of wonder. This research was supported by the grant “Patterns of Development in Estonian Culture of the Transition Period” of the Estonian Ministry of Education and Research (PRG636) and the Centre of Excellence in Estonian Studies (CEES, European Regional Development Fund).

² The poster provided a link to the website Starship Delivery Robot FAQ, n.d., www.uh.edu/dining/delivery-robots (accessed 29 December, 2019).

³ Starship Technologies is the very first autonomous vehicle company to have passed the 100,000 deliveries milestone. Darrell Etherington, “Starship Technologies Raises \$40M, Crosses 100K Deliveries and Plans to Expand to 100 New Universities,” *TC*, August 20, 2019, <http://techcrunch.com/2019/08/20/starship-technologies-raises-40m-crosses-100k-deliveries-and-plans-to-expand-to-100-new-universities/> (accessed 29 December, 2019).

⁴ Walmart’s Click and Collect Pickup Solution in the USA, n.d., <https://cleveron.com/case-study/walmart-s-click-and-collect-solution> (accessed 29 December, 2019).

⁵ Indrek Kald, “Guardtime kahekordistab meeskonna,” *ITuudised.ee*, January 10, 2019, <https://www.ituudised.ee/uudised/2019/01/10/guardtime-kahekordistab-meeskonna> (accessed 29 December, 2019).

⁶ By the end of the 2010s, the continuing success of the start-up Bolt (formerly Taxify), founded in 2013, gave Estonia also a second unicorn (a billion-dollar start-up company). Vicky McKeever, “How a College Dropout Became Europe’s Youngest Founder of a Billion-Dollar Company,” *CNBC.Com*, October 21, 2019, <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/10/21/how-bolt-ceo-markus-villig-became-europes-youngest-unicorn-founder.html> (accessed 15 January, 2020). The value of Transferwise reached \$5 billion in 2020.

⁷ This article is not concerned with questions about the end or continuation of the post-Soviet or postsocialist condition. Here, “post-Soviet” is not used as a critical concept, but as a label that is often applied to the former Soviet Republics both by themselves and by outsiders – a label that is certainly still very much in use.

⁸ Estonia’s VAT gap – that is, uncollected taxes – was estimated to be about 4,9 %, a better result than the EU average 12,8%. European Commission, “Country Report Estonia 2018” (Brussels, 2018), 12. <https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/2018-european-semester-country-report-estonia-en.pdf> (accessed 15 January, 2020).

⁹ Estonian Startup Database, n.d., <https://startupestonia.ee/startups> (accessed 15 December, 2019)

¹⁰ Statistic Estonia, 28 August, <https://www.stat.ee/news-release-2019-097> (accessed 15 January, 2020).

¹¹ European Commission, *Country Report Estonia 2019* (Brussels, 2019), 43, https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/file_import/2019-european-semester-country-report-estonia_en.pdf (accessed 15 January, 2020).

¹² Miroslav Beblavý et al., “Index of Readiness for Digital Lifelong Learning: Changing How Europeans Upgrade Their Skills” (Brussels, 2019), <https://www.ceps.eu/ceps-publications/index-of-readiness-for-digital-lifelong-learning/> (accessed 15 December, 2019).

¹³ Neringa Klumbyte has suggested that 2014 witnessed a new “Baltic frontier era” in Lithuania, defined by preparations against a rising Russian threat. In Klumbyte’s account, the war frontier – that is, anticipation of an eventual war with Russia – constitutes “a defining part” of government policies, public space, and everyday life in Lithuania. Neringa Klumbyte, “Sovereign Uncertainty and the Dangers to Liberalism at the Baltic Frontier,” *Slavic Review* 78, no. 2 (2019): 337. While the focus of my article has been with questions of national self-perception, and not on state policies, it may nonetheless be relevant to observe that rhetoric of a “Baltic frontier” has not become an era-defining discourse in Estonia.

¹⁴ “Ecodigital nationhood” is not a commonly used phrase in Estonia. I articulated this concept first in Spring 2018 and presented my ideas in April 2018 for a large Estonian audience at the annual conference of the Centre of Excellence in Estonian Studies. Since then, the term has become associated with the Biodiversity Party (*Elurikkuse Erakond*), founded in September 2018. Anzori Barkalaja, a folklorist from the University of Tartu, articulated the

main theses of the party platform in Sept 2018: “The development of Estonia, during the next ten years, into a high tech eco-state: Estonia must become an inspiration for the whole world, a unique eco-digital state which will adopt and disseminate original and vital solutions.“ “Barkalaja avas Elurikkuse Erakonna põhimõtteid - üle planeedi tuntud öko-digiriik,” *Err.Ee*, September 6, 2018, <https://www.err.ee/859331/barkalaja-avas-elurikkuse-erakonna-pohimotteid-ule-planeedi-tuntud-oko-digiriik> (accessed 15 January, 2020). For the Biodiversity Party, “eco-digital“ is a label for a state project, a programme which would combine high-tech solutions with environmentally conscious aims and attitudes. My usage of the term ecodigital is not programmatic, but symptomatic; for me, it describes an existing set of cultural imaginaries. I am not associated with the Biodiversity Party. Barkalaja, one of the co-founders of the party, left it in January 2019.

¹⁵ An important thread of the eco-narrative describes Estonians as a *laulurahvas* – a song-people. Some might develop this as a distinct narrative, but, in the context of the 2010s, I see this “song” thread as interwoven with the *maarahvas*-narrative – the song conceived in popular encomia as proceeding from the supposed bond between a people and their land.

¹⁶ Valdur Mikita and Rainer Kerge, “Intervjuu: Eesti märk peaks olema „lgav liiv ja tühi väli“,” *Eesti Loodus*, no. 3 (2017): 46.

¹⁷ Estonia.ee, n.d., <https://estonia.ee/> (accessed 15 January, 2020). While the estonia.ee webpage certainly presents a classic case of nation-branding, this article is not primarily interested in state techniques of branding and marketing a nation. Nation-branding may very well impact the development of national imaginaries, yet many additional, diverse factors – fiction, film, media, cultural history, economic trends, geopolitics – are also at play.

¹⁸ One common myth disseminated in English-language sources is that Estonian first-graders learn coding. In an article about E-stonia on the IMF website, for example, one reads: “Children learn how to write code from the age of seven.” “E-Stonia Takes Off,” *Finance and Development* 55, no. 1 (2018), <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/fandd/2018/03/trenches.htm> (accessed 15 January, 2020). While a 7-year old coder would be an exception rather than a rule even in Estonia, 7-year olds (and their parents) do check their grades and homework with an app from the nationwide ekool.eu platform; the same platform provides easy school-home communication. Ekool was developed in 2002; by 2010 it was used in 77 % of Estonian schools. E-kool, n.d., <https://ekool.compani/et/ekooli-ajaloost> (accessed 15 October, 2019). From the ecological side, Estonian preschoolers and elementary students do indeed spend more time studying local plants than would be typical for students in North American schools.

¹⁹ The eco-digital identity cluster is perhaps primarily characteristic of Estonian-speaking Estonia; parts of the Russophone population will situate their identity partly in relation to Russia – one would expect their canon of identity-narratives to thus include additional elements.

²⁰ Author (2012); Piret Peiker, “Estonian Nationalism Through the Postcolonial Lens,” *Journal of Baltic Studies* 47, no. 1 (2016): 113–32; Author (2018); Vassilis Petsinis, “Identity Politics and Right-Wing Populism in Estonia: The Case of EKRE,” *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 25, no. 2 (2019): 211–30, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537113.2019.1602374>.

²¹ Michael Herzfeld, *Cultural Intimacy: Social Poetics and the Real Life of States, Societies, and Institutions* (London: Routledge, 2016).

²² Dorota Kołodziejczyk, “Policing the Refugee Crisis in Poland. The Politics of Fear vs. the New Cosmopolitics” (paper presented at the ASEEEES-MAG Summer Convention, Lviv, Ukraine, June 26-28, 2016).

²³ Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 6.

²⁴ Milica Bakić-Hayden, “Nesting Orientalisms: The Case of Former Yugoslavia,” *Slavic Review* 54, no. 4 (1995): 917.

²⁵ Benedikts Kalnačs, “Comparing Colonial Differences: Baltic Literary Cultures as Agencies of Europe’s Internal Others,” *Journal of Baltic Studies* 47, no. 1 (2016): 15–30.

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- ²⁶ Johannes Saar, "Cultural Imaginaries of the Postcolony: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Cross-Cultural References in Estonian Art History through a Postcolonial Lens," *Journal of Baltic Studies* 48, no. 4 (2018): 465.
- ²⁷ Merje Kuus, "Europe's Eastern Expansion and the Reinscription of Otherness in East-Central Europe," *Progress in Human Geography* 28, no. 4 (2004): 473.
- ²⁸ Kuus, 475.
- ²⁹ Bakić-Hayden, "Nesting Orientalisms: The Case of Former Yugoslavia," 922.
- ³⁰ Madina Tlostanova, *Postcolonialism and Postsocialism in Fiction and Art: Resistance and Re-Existence* (Cham: Springer, 2017), 4.
- ³¹ Tamás Kiss, "Escaping the 'Balkanizing' Gaze? Perceptions of Global and Internal Developmental Hierarchies in Romania," *East European Politics and Societies* 31, no. 3 (2017): 566. The term 'Balkanism' was introduced by Maria Todorova describing the Western attitudes towards the Balkans in similar terms to Said's 'Orientalism'. Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).
- ³² Kołodziejczyk, Policing the Refugee Crisis in Poland.
- ³³ Franz Fanon and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o among many others, offer many vivid case studies. Frantz Fanon, *Les Damnés de La Terre* (Paris: Éditions Maspéro, 1961); Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (Harare: Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1994).
- ³⁴ Author, 2018.
- ³⁵ It is useful to distinguish between Orientalism and colonialism. Here is one way to make this distinction: „an orientalist perspective assesses the other culture as essentially less worthy and, through the operation of a simplified cultural binarism, fortifies one's own sense of cultural superiority both in general and in selected particulars of one's newly contextualized identity [...]. Colonialism includes orientalist attitudes, yet it also necessarily relies on an established power structure, which enables it to subordinate the other culture not only in imaginary terms, but also through actual political and managerial strategies.“ Author, 186.
- ³⁶ The March 2018 coverage of the European Commission report offers a case in point: in the presentation by Estonian news service err.ee, above the title "European Commission: Estonia can turn into a country of avoiding taxes" one finds a statement in a red font: "The critique of the European Commission is without practical importance", and the views of the commission are presented side by side with comments by Estonian Ministry of Finance. "Euroopa Komisjon: Eesti võib muutuda maksudest hoidumise maaks," err.ee, 07.03.2018, <https://www.err.ee/687979/euroopa-komisjon-eesti-voib-muutuda-maksudest-hoidumise-maaks> (accessed 07 March, 2018). In addition, a separate article next to the critical view also disputes the claims of the European Commission: „Rahandusministeerium: Eesti eelarve ei ole 1,5 protsendiga puudujäägis," err.ee, 07.03.2018, <https://www.err.ee/688030/rahandusministeerium-eesti-eelarve-ei-ole-1-5-protsendiga-puudujaagis> (accessed 07 March 2018).
- ³⁷ "Welcome to E-stonia, the world's most digitally advanced society," *Wired*, October 20, 2016, <https://www.wired.co.uk/article/digital-estonia>; "Lessons From The Most Digitally Advanced Country In The World," *Forbes*, January 15, 2018, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/peterhigh/2018/01/15/lessons-from-the-most-digitally-advanced-country-in-the-world/#61320da21ac0>; Von Reinhold von Eben-Worlée, „Wo Estland Deutschland abhängt," October 11, 2018, <https://www.welt.de/debatte/kommentare/article181941414/Estland-Der-Ruf-als-digitales-Musterland-ist-mehr-als-gerechtfertigt.html>; Anaïs Cherif et Pierre Manière, „L'Estonie – royaume du tout-numérique," May 4, 2018, <https://www.latribune.fr/techno-medias/internet/l-estonie-royaume-du-tout-numerique-774138.html>, (all accessed 18 January, 2020). The international renown of e-Estonia has reached further afield than just the anglosphere; even so, the Western gaze tends to be formed on the basis of British and American media, which is abundantly referenced both in Estonian newspapers and in social media.
- ³⁸ Nathan Heller, "Estonia - the Digital Republic," *The New Yorker*, December 11, 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/12/18/estonia-the-digital-republic> (accessed 15 January, 2020).
- ³⁹ Heller.
- ⁴⁰ Heller.

⁴¹ Heller.

⁴² Heller. Longer development on Toomas Hendrik Ilves' struggles with the US bureaucracy is available here: Nick Douglas, „I'm Former Estonian President Toomas Hendrik Ilves, and This Is How I Work.“ Lifehacker, 16 October 2019 <https://lifehacker.com/im-former-estonian-president-toomas-hendrik-ilves-and-1838158082> (accessed 15 January, 2020).

⁴³ Heller.

⁴⁴ Heller.

⁴⁵ Kerstin Mahlapuu, “Returned to ‘Normality’? Estonian National Identity Constructions after EU and NATO Accession. PhD Thesis” (University of Glasgow, 2019), 199, <http://theses.gla.ac.uk/75156/>. (accessed 15 October, 2019). Mahlapuu conducted 33 in-depth interviews.

⁴⁶ Mahlapuu, 199.

⁴⁷ Ööd means 'nights' in Estonian. The name also plays with an allusion to 'Ood', meaning 'Ode' (as in Ode to Joy).

⁴⁸ Heller, “Estonia - the Digital Republic.”

⁴⁹ Heller, “Estonia - the Digital Republic.”

⁵⁰ “Estonian Design Award – Bruno.” 23.10. 2018, <https://www.oodhouse.com/news/estonian-design-award-bruno/> (accessed 15 January, 2020).

⁵¹ Ööd, n.d., <https://www.oodhouse.com/> (accessed 15 January, 2020).

⁵² *Tuulte tahutud maa*, 2018, directed by Joosep Matjus, Wildkino. To give a comparison, the most popular Estonian feature film in 2018 seated 116,000 viewers. The popularity of *Tuulte tahutud maa* is unprecedented in the Estonian documentary genre.

⁵³ Peeter Laurits, “Kalligraafiline tuul.” *Sirp*, September 28, 2018, <https://sirp.ee/s1-artiklid/film/kalligraafiline-tuul/> (accessed 15 January, 2020).

⁵⁴ Kadri Põlendik, “Eesti firma hakkab kõrbesse oaase rajama.” *Äripäev* December 12, 2014, 10.

⁵⁵ Tiit Kändler, “Metsapoole mälestused,” *Eesti Loodus*, no. 3 (2017): 30.

⁵⁶ Asko Lõhmus, “Mida on näidanud aasta metsapoleemikat,” *Sirp*, September 1, 2017, <https://www.sirp.ee/s1-artiklid/c21-teadus/mida-on-naidanud-aasta-metsapoleemikat/>; Asko Lõhmus, “Metsapoleemika teine aasta: rägastiku võim,” *Sirp*, September 14, 2018, <https://www.sirp.ee/s1-artiklid/c21-teadus/metsapoleemika-teine-aasta-ragastiku-voim/>; Asko Lõhmus, “Metsapoleemika kolmandal aastal ronisid kollid kapist välja,” *Sirp*, August 30, 2019, <https://www.sirp.ee/s1-artiklid/c21-teadus/metsapoleemika-kolmandal-aastal-ronisid-kollid-kapist-valja/> (all accessed 18 January, 2020).

⁵⁷ Linda Kaljundi, “Uusmetsik Eesti,” *Vikerkaar*, no. 7–8 (2018): 68.

⁵⁸ The popular critical journal *Vikerkaar*, for example, has in recent years put out two special issues (no 7-8, 2018 and 9, 2019) with ecological themes. The 2019 issue was composed of short opinion pieces and included two collective manifestos and texts by about 40 writers.

⁵⁹ Valdur Mikita, *Metsik lingvistika: sosinaid kartulikummardajate külast* (Tallinn: Grenader, 2008); Valdur Mikita, *Lingvistiline mets* (Tallinn: Grenader, 2013); Valdur Mikita, *Lindvistika, ehk, metsa see lingvistika* (Vara: Välgi metsad, 2015); Valdur Mikita, *Kukeseene kuulamise kunst. Läänemeresoome elutunnet otsimas* (Vara: Välgi metsad, 2017).

⁶⁰ Vahur Afanasjev and Valdur Mikita, “Areeni Kaanelugu: Valdur Mikita, Metsik Isekirjutaja,” *Eesti Ekspress*, January 24, 2014, <https://ekspress.delfi.ee/areen/areeni-kaanelugu-valdur-mikita-metsik-isekirjutaja?id=67661815> (accessed 15 October, 2019).

⁶¹ A lengthy review by the prominent Estonian critical thinker Hasso Krull, for example, argues that those who take Mikita for a garden-variety nationalist romantic misread him, implying that there's „more“ to Mikita. Hasso Krull, “Lugu mehest, kes kukkus oma sokiauku,” *Vikerkaar*, no. 10 (2013): 162.

⁶² Valdur Mikita often refers not to Estonian or to Finno-Ugrians, but to the Baltic Finnic subgroup of Finno-Ugrians as his point of reference – Finns, Karelians, Vepsians and a few other ethnic groups living are included in the same set. The more than 50 % forestation area in Europe includes also non-Finno-Ugrian Sweden and Latvia – Mikita

occasionally stretches his „chosen people“ to include this larger set. The idea of Finno-Ugrian particularism is not Mikita’s intervention; it became an important cultural trend during the late Soviet years and then lost its cultural significance in the 1990s.

⁶³ Kaido Kama, “Eurooplate vastutus,” *Vikerkaar*, no. 9 (2019): 126.

⁶⁴ Valdur Mikita, *Lingvistiline mets: tsibihärblase paradigma. Teadvuse kiirendi* (Tallinn: Grenader, 2013), 142.

⁶⁵ Kaljundi, “Uusmetsik Eesti,” 70. For Kaljundi’s critique of Mikita’s views, see also Linda Kaljundi, “Eestlus – loodusrahvamüüt keskkonnakriisi ajastul,” *Vikerkaar*, no. 9 (2019): 114–18.

⁶⁶ Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

⁶⁷ Mikita, *Kukeseene kuulamise kunst*, 42.

⁶⁸ Ööd, n.d., <https://www.oodhouse.com/>, see videos (accessed 15 October, 2019).

⁶⁹ Note that Estonia has strict regulations and control over these matters.

⁷⁰ European Commission, “Country Report Estonia 2018,” 20,21. Some efforts were made to improve this situation with the tax reform of 2018, yet the impact of these reforms falls far short of what would be necessary. Ibid. See also Aet Annist research about the processes of individualization and the collapse of the village society in the post-Soviet years: Aet Annist, *Otsides kogukonda sotsialismijärgses keskkülas. Arenguanthropoloogiline uurimus* (Tallinn: Tallinn University Press, 2011).

⁷¹ European Commission, “Country Report Estonia 2018,” 6. See also European Commission, *Country Report Estonia 2019*, 17.

⁷² European Commission, “Country Report Estonia 2018,” 24.

⁷³ “Soviet Mural Enjoys Rare Estonian Restoration,” *Bbc.com*, September 28, 2017,

<https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-news-from-elsewhere-41427733> (accessed 18 January, 2020). It is especially noteworthy that according to the project leader Hilka Hiiop, public comment on this work in social media and in newspaper commentary was largely positive, thus indicating a general support for such projects. Robert Treufeldt and Hilka Hiiop, “Difficult Stories of a Difficult Legacy: Researches, Problems and Solutions in Conserving Art from within the Soviet Armed Forces” (paper presented at the symposium *The Soviet Otherwise: Affects, Margins, and Imaginaries*, Kurtina, Estonia, July 25-26, 2019).

⁷⁴ Svetlana Boym, *The Off-Modern* (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 3.

⁷⁵ Boym, 43.

⁷⁶ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, trans. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), J56a,6.

⁷⁷ “Helme: Kaaluksime Pariisi kliimaleppes lahkumist,” *Err.ee*, February 21, 2019,

<https://www.err.ee/913158/helme-kaaluksime-pariisi-kliimaleppes-lahkumist> (accessed 18 January, 2020).

⁷⁸ It is fair to say there were more significant changes in 2020, but these remain beyond the scope of the present article.

⁷⁹ Take, for example, the interview with Clyde Kull, the Estonian representative in the EU, who, in October 2019, again confirmed that the election of EKRE has not changed Estonia’s status as an authority in the domain of digital societies. Epp Ehand, “Clyde Kull: EL kuulab Eestit kõiges, mis puudutab uut tehnoloogiat.” *Err.ee*, July 27, 2019 <https://www.err.ee/965168/clyde-kull-el-kuulab-eestit-koiges-mis-puudutab-uut-tehnoloogiat> (accessed 18 January, 2020).

⁸⁰ “Tõnis Saarts: EKRE on tõestanud, et nad ei sobi valitsusliitudes valitsema.” *Err.ee*, December 18, 2019, <https://www.err.ee/1015283/tonis-saarts-ekre-on-toestanud-et-nad-ei-sobi-valitsusliitudes-valitsema> (accessed 18 January, 2020).

⁸¹ The titles refer to Estonia’s resistance against the right-wing EKRE: “Estonia Battles Its Elected Racists” <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/07/18/estonia-battles-its-elected-racists/>; “Estonia apologises after minister mocks Finland PM,” BBC news, December 17, 2019 https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-50818032?SThisFB&fbclid=IwAR3zmIjTsImMEYzeIESDj8-ulPVpUe-9Uv_k9U4Q5YO49tSfA5vOtKNhp10

(accessed 18 January, 2020). Similar rhetoric is found in *The Financial Times* article of Dec 16, 2019: „Estonia, which has 1.3m people and became a well-respected member of the EU and Nato after regaining its independence following the collapse of the Soviet Union, is well known for its use of digital services for citizens and increasingly its world-class education system. But the liberal elite in the Baltic country has been shocked by EKRE joining the government and their nationalist discourse.“ https://www.ft.com/content/4e3272f2-1fff-11ea-b8a1-584213ee7b2b?FTCamp=engage%2FCAPI%2Fwebapp%2FChannel_Moreover%2F%2FB2B&fbclid=IwAR1q9IKb9Pw3ROdUpohbnkyypJfO6uBAdccD9BvHpcuT3JpMJt0eR9RNoKQ (accessed 18 January, 2020).

⁸² Kliimatemaatika küsitlus, October, 2019, <https://www.inst.ee/uuringud/kliimatemaatika-kusitlus> (accessed 15 January, 2020).

⁸³ Tech Green Pledge, n.d., <https://techgreenpledge.org/> (accessed 18 January, 2020).