

# Estonian Identity Construction Between Nation Branding and Building

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**Abstract:** Whilst most accounts of nation branding emphasize the economic and diplomatic relevance of the phenomenon, this article examines the way Estonia has been proposing a nation “branding + building” strategy. Drawing from an empirical study of 1) evolving campaigns of Enterprise Estonia; 2) the leverage of the national e-Residency program in attracting foreign investment; and 3) tourist and marketing strategies based on the revisiting of ‘Estonian’ culinary tradition, we look at the way official narratives have been claiming, with the help of nation branding elements, that the country has quickly de-Sovietized and that there is a new understanding of the Estonian nation and “Estonianness”. This is intended to eventually prompt a reflection on the relationship between nation-building and nation branding, which can, in some circumstances, overlap and influence identity construction at the domestic and international level.

**Keywords:** digitalization, Estonia, food, identity, nation branding.

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Since its initial theorization (Deutsch – Foltz 2010 [1966]; Pye 1962) debates about nation-building have tended to emphasize macro and state actors in the construction of national identities. However, its initial focus on domestic elites and institutions (Connor 1972) has gradually been expanded to include the efforts of foreign powers as nation-building actors as well – most notably the US, in the stabilization of transitional countries (Fukuyama 2006). In line with these tendencies, debates on identity construction, in the post-socialist world and beyond, have emphasized the role of the ruling elites in rediscovering, or making up, national identity markers (Adams 2010; Brubaker 1996; Laitin 1998).

In contrast, an emerging stream of scholarship has started looking at non-state-induced efforts to define and spread a national identity (Agarin 2010; Isaacs 2015; Isaacs – Polese 2016; Richardson 2008; Polese 2010; Rodgers 2007). The roots of this approach can be sought already in the mid-nineties, when debates on nationalism and construction of identity started paying attention to the unintended consequences of political actions. From Billig (1995) on, it is no longer only “what you see” that influences your identity but also what can be called invisible, or unnoticed, markers. The flags hang limply (Billig 1995: 40–41, see also Skey 2015), but how do we know that people don’t notice them? Eventually the very fact of “not noticing” a national symbol can be regarded as a sign of acceptance of national narratives (Fox 2017: 4). These ideas have informed an emerging stream of research on the everyday (Edensor 2002; Foster 2002; Goode – Stroup 2015) that looks at the way construction of national identity can be influenced by unintended consequences of political measures or by civic initiatives that eventually become mainstreamed by a state or its society (Navaro-Yashin 2002; Polese – Horak 2015).

In spite of these premises, studies on nation branding have surprisingly had little influence on nation building literature. It is true that branding is “*concerned with a country’s whole image on the international stage, covering political, economic and cultural dimensions*” (Fan 2010: 98). But it is also true that marketing can be used to communicate a diplomatic or strategic message (Potter 2009) to a variety of (not necessarily business) audiences. By conveying a certain message, we contribute to constructing our identity and the way others perceive us. Indeed, acceptance of our identity by others is a fundamental part of our identity so it is by convincing “others” about our identity that our very identity gets reshaped. By force of this, nation branding can be regarded as a nation building tool in that that an image of us is constructed, and conveyed to others, and we thus hope that they will keep on “reminding us” about it; the image is a thing that should eventually “get back to us” so we can be convinced that the image other people have of us is the correct one and adopt it.

These reflections have grounded the approach and goal of this paper, which is two-fold. Informed by Harvey’s (1989) idea of practices that are lived, reproduced and transformed through everyday interaction between actors and objects (Lefebvre 1991; Massey 1995; Ozolina-Fitzgerald 2016), we examine three major loci of nation branding in Estonia: the evolving campaigns of Enterprise Estonia in order to position Estonia firmly as part of “Europe” and “Scandinavia”, the leveraging of its e-Residency programme to attract foreign investment, and the presenting of a uniquely “Estonian” culinary tradition. We draw from these areas to comprehensively explain not only the diversity of Estonia’s branding activities – pertaining to geographic orientation, economic development, and cultural uniqueness. We also use them to illustrate how Estonia has been able to develop a relatively consistent nation branding strategy, especially compared to other post-Soviet countries. The empirical material illustrated is used to suggest not only that the country is unique in its approach and resource use for nation branding purposes. Even more importantly, Estonia – where nation branding has collected an unprecedented amount of resources and efforts, can be used to illustrate a further function of nation branding. Initially conceived as a channel for economic development and diplomatic dialogue, nation branding in Estonia has been used with the second goal of gaining international support for a particular view on the country and, in turn, promoting a certain version of “Estonianess”.

Supported by this evidence, we then move on to our theoretical point. We argue that nation branding can be used to promote an official narrative and propose new identity markers that can be received and accepted by the local population as “signs of Estonianess” (or any other nationhood). We borrow here from the idea of civic nation building used by Kuzio (2001) when challenging Brubaker’s “nationalising the state” framework (1996).

While nation building leveraging on ethnic markers emphasizes ethnicity, blood ties and (perceived) history, features that are (allegedly) delivered at birth and cannot change (Smith 1986), civic nation building relies on creation, spreading and acceptance of values such as devotion to the state, and contributions to its political and economic development. But this is the category of markers that nation branding may contribute to creating. In line with what Nakano (2004) has called “economic nationalism”, in the case of Estonia, branding praises Estonian successes and achievements, while promoting a perception of the country that rotates around certain civic values of which any citizen can be proud regardless of their ethnic origins (victories in international song contests, being the first e-governance country in the world, innovative cuisine and healthy eating). These messages are directed at international publics but end up affecting the self-perception of domestic ones. We start from an understanding of nation branding as selling a given image of a country to external actors to acknowledge that in the Estonian case, it has been widely used to support a national identity construction narrative. In other words, we suggest that in Estonia nation branding has been used as a boomerang. By sending a message to the world about several features of the Estonian society and convincing international actors of the truth of the message, the country has attempted to “convince itself” about it.

The article begins with background information on the broader literature of nation branding, including its history, purposes, and application, as well as providing a brief overview of nation branding in the post-socialist spaces generally, and in Estonia in particular. The following section outlines the methodological approach that we have been using to conduct three case studies of Estonian nation branding efforts. The first one documents the nation branding efforts of the country starting from the victory in the Eurovision festival that brought the country under the spotlight. The section is informed by an analysis of government websites and tourist brochures, and informal discussions with marketing specialists contributing to the strategy. The following section analyses the solid march of the country to the digitalization of all services and has been informed by a textual analysis of documents such as official publications and, in particular, those grounding the preparatory work for what has then become the e-Residence programme (for both internal use and external purposes). The following one offers a discussion on the relationship between the revisited Estonian cuisine and nation branding. Finally, the last section has also been informed by an analysis of government sources and a government-informed market strategy.

## **FROM BUILDING TO BRANDING**

Since its very first uses (Deutsch – Foltz 2010 [1966]; Pye 1962), nation-building has taken many different meanings and applications ranging from measures to create political unity in a post-colonial sovereign state to efforts to create ethnic and cultural cohesion in what have been considered modern nation-states (e.g. France, Germany) to identity construction in the post-communist world (see Kolstø 2016; Polese 2011). What all these views have in common, and the present article is intended to challenge, are two main features. First, nation-building is predominantly regarded as an elite or state-driven process. The very term “building” and its use seem to point at some degree of consistency and the state’s capacity to make long-term plans since “there was no nation here, so we build it through a social engineering project”. Second, identity construction is often represented as an intended consequence of an allegedly coherent set of measures called a nation building process. This is not always the case. As Scott (1998) has vividly illustrated, state-led projects attempting homogenization in whatever form are destined to fail, or at least not produce the initially expected results. A state needs to standardize, find a one-size-fits-all approach which is not always suitable to all (or even the majority of) its citizens. Lawmaking and its application is not a smooth process going from intention

to implementation with no distortion and leading to the expected results (Kasza 2002). Instead, much gets lost on the way, namely in the translation of a political will into laws and technical instructions, in the way middle actors understand and put into practice state-led instructions and in the way the target citizens receive and accept state instructions (Polese 2009). We make this claim, of course, labouring under the assumption that the above-mentioned “political will” had correctly understood the relative societal needs and had proposed adequate measures to meet them, which is not always the case either. This idea has been supported by views that both institutions and non-state actors may contribute to the construction of the political life of a state (Navaro-Yashin 2002).

National identity construction literature has been receptive of the above critiques, and authors have suggested several possible avenues through which national identity construction might travel with only marginal, or unaware, influence from state-led actors. Authors have explored the unintended consequences of state support to sectors such as cinema and music (Isaacs 2018; Strzemżalska 2017) in the redefinition of a national identity. Although not state-led, funding for artistic projects sometimes comes from the state, which can prioritize a project or an approach over another, thus giving emphasis to a given interpretation of history (Isaacs 2016). The same can be said for the way national heritage, national food or other national features is/are promoted through advertising (Gavrilova 2018; Fabrykant 2018). Megaprojects and megaevents have been another object of inquiry in a similar way. In such cases, what is relevant is not so much what the elites were trying to say but what transpires from the synergy between state-led instructions and their perception at the bottom level (Menga 2015; Militz 2016). What these informal nation building tools have in common is their “indirectness” feature. Nation building has traditionally been studied as originating among the elites, state structures and institutions to be passed off to the citizens and the society. However, the above works, and their connection with the everyday literature have come to influence studies of nationalism by showing that national identity construction is not necessarily a linear process (Edensor 2002). What is more important is that in a number of cases, identity markers are not directly coming from the state but from non-state or even nonpolitical actors, or are unintended side consequences of political decisions (Polese – Horak 2015: 2).

In our view, identity markers can be introduced by actors other than the state, or by the state itself (but with different intentions) and go “all the way up” so as to affect national identity construction in either of the following two ways: 1) the state purchases the practice and adopts a tool that had been conceived outside of the state structure; 2) the state suggests a direction or a marker without being willing to do so, or aware of doing so. Nation branding fits nicely into this framework.

Since the word emerged in academic debates (Anholt 2007), nation branding has widely been considered an economic and market-driven element. Indeed, nation branding may be regarded as distinct from nation-building in that it mostly targets an international audience and (re)focuses national narratives on a pre-selected set of values and features that a society, or its elites, would like the world to notice (Gudjonsson 2005; Volcic – Andrejevic 2011; Dinnie 2008; Fan 2006, 2010; Kaneva 2011). It basically consists of selling an “image” of the country to external actors. As such, while nation-building is subject to negotiation, since the proposed identities and values need to be accepted by the population (Polese 2011; Isaacs – Polese 2016), nation branding de facto bypasses this step by talking directly to international publics that are less sensitive to certain issues and are less likely to criticize, and challenge, the narrative constructed by the given country. By force of its heterogeneity, it can serve several purposes. First, nation branding can act as a supplement to interstate diplomacy to establish a state’s legitimacy or lead the state to position itself geopolitically (Browning – de Oliveira 2017: 490). In the European context, this was often done by presenting the state as “European” in order to achieve

integration into regional institutions like NATO and the European Union. For example, the Czech Republic repeatedly noted that Prague was geographically further west than Vienna as part of its “return to Europe” narrative (Radio Praha 1998). Second, nation branding is designed to advance the economic goals of the country by promoting trade, tourism, and foreign investment, and therefore economic development. This is especially important in the current competitive global marketplace where states need to enhance their international visibility, differentiate themselves from other states, find their economic niche, and build a state “brand” (van Ham 2001: 129). Third, nation branding can be used more reactively to compensate for or overcome something negative. This can come in the form of repairing a state’s negative image due to long-standing perceptions of it or in response to more immediate events which have proven harmful to the state’s reputation (Jansen 2008: 124). Aronczyk (2013: 16) also mentioned a final purpose which connects back to a form of nation-building: generating “*positive foreign public opinion that will ‘boomerang’ back home, fostering both domestic consensus or approbation of [the nation’s] actions as well as pride and patriotism within the nation’s borders*”.

Nation branding can be regarded as a set of efforts intended to influence a country’s reputation in the international arena for mainly economic and business purposes. In other words, the country in question wants to promote its image and “sell” one or several of its features to attract tourists, investors, workers, or companies or to simply gain visibility through a nation branding campaign. This very campaign is built in a proper and convincing way so that the country gains an international reputation or changes its branding in some parts. Inasmuch as the country can convince external actors that the message of the campaign reflects how the country “really” is, the more actors catch the message and repeat it, the more it becomes likely that people on the domestic level will listen to the message being delivered not by national authorities but by international actors. One thing is to listen to your government, which may already deliver a sufficiently convincing message. Another one is to hear other authoritative voices or even faraway countries speaking highly about your country and possibly convincing you that what your country was advocating is “true” since it is confirmed by so many other voices outside the country. When this happens, we are moving “from branding to building” and it may eventually affect the self-perception of the population of that very country.

## OVERVIEW OF THE METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The above arguments, and the overall study, rest on the results of a five-year research project employing a wide and diverse methodology that we need to illustrate to make the reader familiar with our approach. The project was intended to look at informal loci of identity building in Estonia. This meant, from one side, to study the way institutions, pushed by the elites, had attempted to develop a consistent narrative on who the Estonians are, and what Estonia is. The narrative was then developed in two different directions: that of a nation-building project trying to redefine the post-Soviet Estonian identity, and that of a branding strategy trying to sell a certain image of Estonia to the world. Our project compared the results from these top forces to the way Estonian inhabitants (i.e. citizens and stateless people living on the Estonian territory) live these narratives.

As a result, the “top” components of the research were gathered through text analysis and informal interviews with key informants. We looked at the way Estonian narratives are constructed by state actors through political channels (party politics, political discourses) and commercial ones (e.g. creation of food narratives, support for certain kinds of enterprises proposing innovations but in a somehow national key). We turned to state-led companies and actors intended to foster commercial and cultural initiatives such as the collective singing festivals, the decoration and branding of the national airport, and tourist brochures to look at the way two kinds of people received, perceived and possibly accepted

these “instructions”. First, we looked at the commercial sector and how the companies tried (or did not try) to develop their businesses in line with the national(istic) guidelines provided by the state. To what extent were the marketing strategies evocative (at the conscious or subconscious level) of national narratives? Second, we looked at ordinary people, and their agency, when they negotiated, questioned or opposed national narratives.

### **NATION BRANDING IN POST-SOCIALISM**

The economic, social, and political baggage of the socialist era weighed heavily upon the states of Central/Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union following the fall of communism. Following the 1989/1991 events, these states had to also (re)introduce themselves as independent countries in the face of external perceptions which often saw them as backward, not worthy of foreign investment, and not prepared for membership in the “West” – perceptions which were already overburdened with the legacies of Euro-Orientalism, Balkanism, and “othering” (Neumann 1999; Said 1985; Todorova 2009). Compounding this process is the fact that their own attempts to reframe their histories have been interrupted by external “alternative narrators” which “*often thoughtlessly besmirch the ‘brand’ of the post-Soviet world through their [...] works of popular culture and artistic imagination*” (Saunders 2016: 3). Consequently, many of these states realized very early on that they needed to actively engage in nation branding efforts in order to “*redefine relationships with the Western world, overcome the negative image of socialism, and, often, further support European integration*” (Pawlusz – Polese 2017: 876; Kaneva 2011).

Central and East European countries, such as Poland (Aronczyk 2013: 82–106), the Czech Republic (Cabada – Waisová 2016), and Romania and Bulgaria (Kaneva – Popescu 2011), had the advantage of being geographically or culturally closer to West European markets and having established pre-socialist state identities that they could effectively market. This proved more difficult for the post-Soviet republics which are, for obvious reasons, closely tied to their Soviet pasts – a past which had even more negative connotations. In the case of Ukraine, its positive efforts in nation branding have been undermined by a series of political and geopolitical upheavals (Bolin – Ståhlberg 2015), as even noted by the government itself. The states of the Caucasus have had similar problems (Harris-Brandts 2018). Russia’s efforts in this regard have been mixed with its on-again/off-again attempt to present itself as a “European” country, on the one hand, coming into direct conflict with its desire to project an image of Russia as a ‘great power’, as well as its glorification of the USSR-era Great Patriotic War, Russia’s aggressive foreign policy, and the rehabilitation of Josef Stalin, on the other (Szostek 2017; Miazhevich 2018). This can create a negative dynamic in which “*Russian and ‘Western’ currents feed into, off, and through each other*” in a negative way (Saunders – Strukov 2017). Central Asian states remain particularly disadvantaged in their nation branding efforts because of their geographic and cultural distance from these markets, as well as their weaker economic foundations or status as rentier states. Consequently, they have had to go about this in a different way (Saunders 2008; Marat 2009; Fauve 2015). As for Belarus, its official embrace of its Soviet past under President Alexander Lukashenko has largely rejected such efforts (Bekus 2010).

For their part, the Baltic States fell between the Central/Eastern countries and the former Soviet republics, with their ability to exploit their greater cultural and historical ties to Western Europe and their pre-Soviet statehood during the interwar period (Andersson 2007). Of these, Estonia was particularly aggressive in its nation branding activities, even going as far as to position itself as separate from the other Baltic States (Bolin – Ståhlberg 2015; Jansen 2008; Jordan 2014a, 2014b; Pawlusz – Polese 2017). This was particularly important because of its small population, its troubled Soviet past, its history of being squeezed by larger forces, the potential for ethnic strife given its large number of ethnic Russians, and

its difficult relationship with Russia, with which it shares a substantial border. Estonia has done this by building a narrative of the country as firmly westward-oriented and possessing a nimbler and more diverse economic base than the other Baltic States and a commitment to technological innovation and connectivity – in short, as decisively ‘European’, and more specifically ‘Scandinavian’, and definitely not ‘Soviet’ (Kerikmäe – Chochia – Mölder 2019). As the following case studies illustrate, this has been expressed in nation branding campaigns in the realms of geographic orientation, economic development, and cultural uniqueness.

### **“BRAND ESTONIA”: (RE)POSITIONING ESTONIA’S REGIONAL IDENTITY**

The Estonian nation branding and communication strategy has benefited from the capacity of domestic actors to take advantage of the limited opportunities the country had and capitalize on the few occasions to make the country visible on the international arena. The key of the strategy has rotated around positioning the country as firmly European in a geographic/conceptual sense and separating it from its Soviet past. This was done by taking advantage of several components largely driven by Enterprise Estonia, a government-inducted project to promote the image of Estonia across the world.

Since its inception in 2000 Enterprise Estonia (EE) promotes the development of business and regional policy in the country through support for entrepreneurship in a wide sense. It provides financial support, advice and training as well as networking between sectors, regions and countries to boost Estonia’s competitiveness worldwide. With a budget of over €81 million for 2019 and an unquestionably ambitious vision to be achieved by 2023,<sup>1</sup> the agency is currently endorsed with the goal of making Estonia one of the most competitive countries in the world. The work performed by Enterprise Estonia had been going on since independence but it was formalized under the EE umbrella from 2000 to better capitalize on the first years of branding and systematize the related efforts. Since 2001, most of the nation branding elements were systematized and taken up by a single entity. Key to this process, and speeding up the process of creation of the agency, was the country’s victory in the 2001 Eurovision Song Contest that implied that it would host the 2002 competition. This opportunity encouraged the government to redouble its efforts in this regard. Estonia had been participating in the contest since 1994 as a virtually unknown contestant to the European public (it was classified 24<sup>th</sup> out of 25 participants). However, with the song “Everybody” performed by Tanel Padar and Dave Benton, accompanied by the group 2XL, the country won the chance to host the 2002 Eurovision Song Contest.

When preparing to host the 2002 event, the country not only invested into and developed its infrastructure. It also invested in promotion and advertising to make the country attractive to Eurovision-tourists, fascinate them enough to stay longer and, on this wave, change its image in the eyes of the world. Beyond the debates deliberating on the boundaries and definition of Estonian identity, the nation branding of the country started in the early 2000s. Developed by Enterprise Estonia, the promotion and branding campaign held the slogan “Welcome to Estonia” and envisioned Estonia as a quickly and peacefully transformed country. It also attempted to construct an image of the country as quiet and friendly, which became a priority of the tourism promotion. To do this, tourists had to feel “safe” in the country, which would need to be, at the same time, “exotic but not too much” since it would then be perceived as dangerous. This was done by emphasizing both the multicultural and European nature of the country, which could be regarded as a hub where German, Nordic, Russian and Baltic cultures meet. Indeed, the “Introduce Estonia” brochure’s section on the marketing concept for tourism, reads:

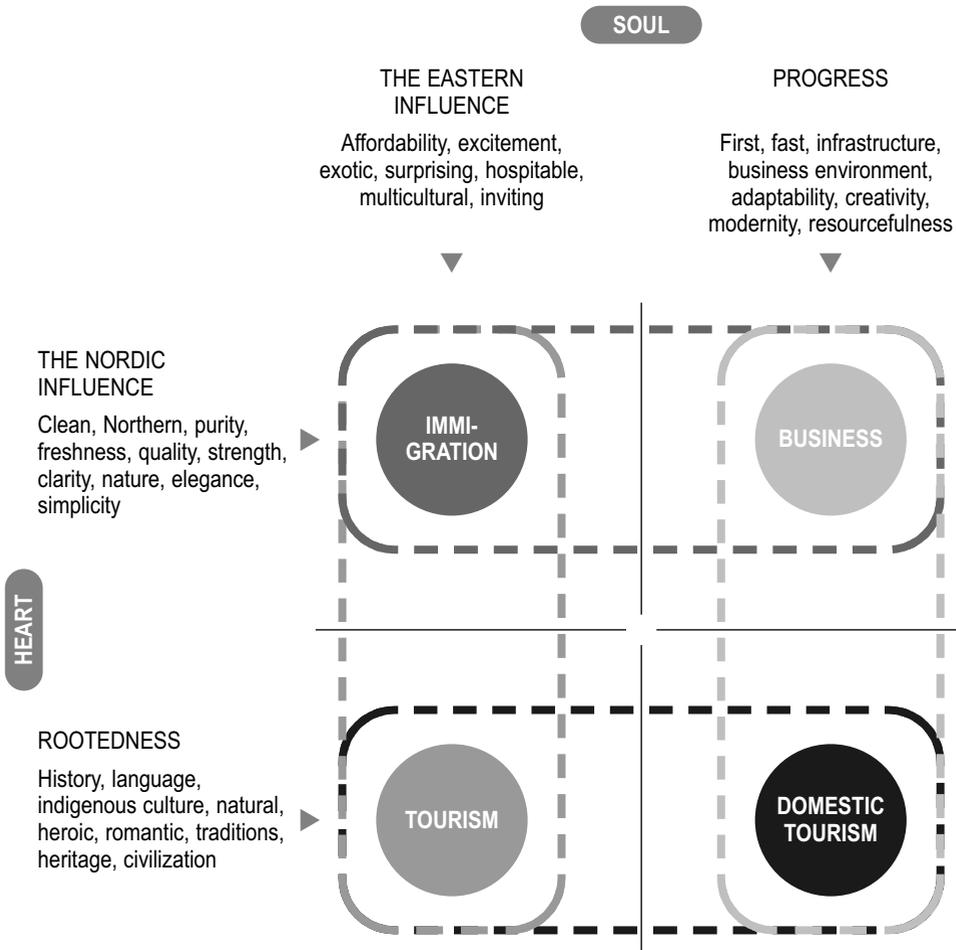
*“By geographic location, we belong in the Baltic region. By language, we belong in Scandinavia. By allies, we belong in Europe. By the prevailing religion, we belong*

*in Germany. By history, we belong in Sweden, Denmark, Livonia and Russia. By climate, we belong in the North*” (Enterprise Estonia 2012: 3).

The country has also sought to present itself as “the best-kept secret of Scandinavia” (Enterprise Estonia 2012) to go against visions placing it in Eastern Europe or, worse, seeing it as a post-Soviet republic. The trauma of the occupation of Estonia, which today is reminisced about in the context of a loud anti-Soviet (a term now sometimes translated as “anti-Russia”) narrative, is a constant reminder of top Estonian officials who, since the late nineties, have sought to separate the country from the other two Baltic states with various political goals such as faster European integration (Mole 2012). In this respect, the adopted strategy tended to highlight four “cornerstones of Estonia” to use them as basic tools for marketing communication: the Nordic influence, rootedness, the Eastern influence and progress, as shown in the figure below.

The figure above identifies four target audiences: those interested in immigration, tourism, business and domestic tourism, respectively. To each of these audiences the

**Figure 1**  
**Enterprise Estonia, the “Introduce Estonia” marketing concept for tourism**  
**(Enterprise Estonia 2012: p. 5).**



message about Estonia's desirability is conveyed in a different way. The Nordic and Eastern dimension should produce a picture making the country familiar to people willing to settle there. Emphasizing Estonia's capacity to innovate, be progressive, and deliver "Nordic" quality at a fraction of the price one would pay in Scandinavia is intended to attract investors and entrepreneurs. Estonia is further depicted as a Nordic country (elegant, clean, simple) with an Eastern soul (hospitable, exotic, spontaneous), thus echoing the juxtaposition of the modern and sophisticated West with some kind of Slavic soul (Pawlusz – Polese 2017: 6).

From this viewpoint, the launch of the first Estonia marketing concept in the period immediately prior to the hosting of the competition is meaningful not only per se as an identity construction exercise but also as a message to be conveyed to the world. Commissioned by Enterprise Estonia, the campaign had as its goal to increase foreign investments and tourism bases while broadening the scope of Estonia's export market (Dinnie 2008: 230). To this end, the project benefited from the help of Interbrand, a British-based consultancy that was also responsible for the Cool Britannia project in the UK (Jordan 2014a).

The main slogan "Welcome to Estonia: Positively Transforming" had two main components. The first part of the sentence was made into a logo highlighting that everyone was welcome. Besides this, the combination of "positively" with "transforming" was intended to emphasize the country's rapid moving away from its Soviet past as a "*revolutionary, positive and welcome change against all odds*" (Dinnie 2008: 233). The approach could somehow be linked to Poland's "creative tensions" or Romania's "simply surprising" slogans. In such promotions, surprise, tension and contrasts are intended to feed a narrative locating the given country (Estonia, but also Poland and Romania) on an imaginary crossroads of "East" and "West" where the fascination with "eastern cultures" meets with the familiarity of the Western world to make the audience feel comfortable or at home.

The very "Return to Europe" narrative, which can be found to a varying extent in all of the three Baltic Republics, was meant to bring the country back to its "natural path" to a supposed European family (Lauristin 2009; Lauristin – Vihalemm 2009) that got disrupted by Soviet domination. The fact that the country was incorporated into the USSR against its will, which would unanimously be to "stay in Europe," was also highlighted by the opening of the Estonian Museum of Soviet Occupation in 2003. The museum was later renamed, to offer a more positive note, the "Museum of Occupation and Freedom" with the main goal of establishing a *lieu de memoire* (Nora – Erll 1997), and learning about the country's past to understand its present. The museum's statement states that it is to "*tell touching stories about Estonia's recent history that make people think about the value and fragility of freedom*", which is in line with the policies of other occupation museums (particularly those in Latvia and Georgia). It is nonetheless a clear statement on the trauma of the Soviet annexation that can reinforce official narratives about the Estonian Republic emphasizing its existence since 1918, as one such narrative can be found on the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs:

*"The Estonian Republic was declared on 24 February 1918. During World War II, Estonia lost its independence and was occupied for several decades until Estonian independence was re-established on 20 August 1991. After Estonia's independence was restored, its foreign policy goal was to join the European Union and NATO"* (Estonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2014).

Eventually, the state narratives were completed through a message that was both positive and negative: the widespread use of the word "Nordic" instead of "Baltic" in an attempt to relocate the country in the imaginary "the people", and the association of normality

with anything which was “not Soviet” or “not Communist” (Eglitis 2002: 8). It was in this context that Enterprise Estonia launched the Welcome to Estonia campaign, which, amongst other things, served to promote Estonia’s Nordic temperament (Jordan 2014a: 290).

“Nordic” here is used with several meanings. On the one hand, it can be regarded as a way to continue the “Nordic vis-a-vis Europe” discourse introduced by Wæver (1992; see also Hansen – Wæver 2003), where “Nordic” has been used with some implications of being “above” (and thus implicitly superior to) Europe or “the old Europe”. As Estonia is geographically close to Scandinavia, this could be regarded as a shortcut for it to move from being a new EU member to being a functional and effective EU member. On the other hand, this would also cut short(er) generalizations about the Baltic states and their Soviet past. Given its proximity to Finland, Estonia has often been regarded as the most progressive and liberal of the Soviet republics. Thanks to its linguistic and cultural ties, it has also managed to receive more assistance than the other Soviet republics and import a great deal of governance tools that it has then transformed and sometimes improved. This was further confirmed by Taavi Rõivas’ words *“We do not need a tunnel between Helsinki and Tallinn to show the connection between the two countries”* (Estonian World 2016). The Nordic dimension thus looks like a perfect chance to rebrand Estonia and for it to leave post-socialism quicker than its neighbours.

The “Nordic” concept was intended to give a broader view of Estonia, which in this view was promoted as a real hub of civilizations, as romantically described by the statist Lennart Meri (2016 [1976]) in his book *Silver White* (Hõbevalge). This view also informed the Brand Estonia campaign:

*“Our bones are from the East and our flesh from the West, but this is as difficult to describe as the splitting of a personality after the separation of the two hemispheres of the brain. There were no people in Central Sweden when we landed on these shores to fish and set traps. We spoke our own language, of which we have retained about a thousand words, and these are still understood along the banks of the Volga and Pechora and beyond the Ural Mountains. A thousand words is not much in terms of modern vocabulary but during the Stone Age? As you can see, it was enough for us...”* (Brand Estonia 2012c).

The message was reinforced by the publication of the then Prime Minister Mart Laar’s (2002) book *Estonia: The Little Country That Could*. Receiving wide media coverage, the book was used to draw attention to the solid and successful reforms the country had managed to complete so as to present Estonia as stable and investment-friendly. This was just in time for the country’s accession into the EU in May 2004 and the Schengen zone in 2007, thanks to which investments started to regularly, but timidly, flow into the country (OECD 2017).

Since 2008, however, this “transforming” image of the country was judged not enough to attract international attention. Accordingly, the country sought to move beyond the identity of a country in transition and toward that of one that had completed its journey and arrived as fully European. Guided by this, the Brand Estonia campaign was re-defined in 2008. The idea now was to convince audiences that the country had now consolidated its position and was now ready to surprise the world through its open thinking, innovation and development. The resulting orientation and platform to promote Estonia, was branded “Positively Surprising”. The new slogan was thus intended to reflect a growing tendency. In the words of some of the authors of the campaign, people usually came to Estonia with low expectations and were, instead, positively surprised by the country’s qualities (Brand Estonia 2012a). Accordingly, the corresponding redefinition of the Estonian character was centred on some core ideas, namely: the Nordic influence (the idea that Estonians are

rational and prudent); a sense of place (the fact that Estonians feel a strong attachment to their land and culture); the Eastern Influence (Estonians are “Nordic” but they come from the East and are thus at ease when encountering both Western and Eastern cultures); and progress (Estonians love nature but also technology and are one of the most innovative peoples in the world).<sup>2</sup> Such an approach was intended to consolidate the country’s position at the international level but also to move it towards a further branding component: the digitalization of the country and the construction of its reputation as a paper-free and effective bureaucracy, as illustrated in the next section.

### A (DIGITAL) MESSAGE IN A BOTTLE FOR INVESTORS

As early as in 2011, the European Parliament and the European Council decided to base in Estonia the headquarters of the European Union Agency for the Operational Management of Large-Scale IT Systems in the Area of Freedom, Security and Justice (eu-LISA). The task was formally handed over to it in 2018 but Estonia had been long preparing for such an opportunity through a three-fold strategy for attracting new technologies, companies and know-how for further digitalization of services. Indeed, the website Invest in Estonia (2020) defines the country as “*northern Europe’s hub for knowledge and digital business*”. Since investments and companies need a workforce, a sister website titled “Work in Estonia” (Work in Estonia 2020) was created to help attract foreign workers to “*Northern Europe’s knowledge hub in tech*”; the website states that if you are an innovative worker you should “*come work in Estonia to accelerate your career*”.

Although geographically questionable, the “Nordic” strategy had at least two *raisons d’être*, each of which was connected to promoting Estonia as a place where one could/should do business. First, Estonia tried to connect its attempts to position itself as “Nordic” or “Scandinavian” by, in essence, ‘trading’ on the already-existing positive views of the business climate of Nordic/Scandinavian countries. Second, the country tried to separate itself from other East European, and especially other former Soviet, countries by emphasizing its ‘digital’ assets and e-Residency programme. Indeed, perceptions of Estonia as post-Soviet, Eastern Europe or even Baltic could make investors frown or at least wonder to what extent a country bordering Russia and under Moscow’s influence for nearly five decades, would be able to meet potential investors’ needs (Kerikmäe – Vallikivi 2000). To slowly “move” Estonia geographically from Eastern to Northern Europe was a cunning and subtle action that possibly influenced the perception of the country in the eyes of thousands of potential investors. This “Nordic” narrative, perpetuated through state-sponsored campaigns, was replicated through a myriad of everyday activities such as the innovation and business center MEKTORY, where, among other things, a written description of a heating project states that *for Nordic countries, heating capacity is vital for their populations* (i.e., leaving the reader to understand that Estonia is one of these Nordic countries). Branding changes the way public space is lived: Tallinn Airport is self-named *the coziest airport in the world*; its seats are covered with fabrics resembling the traditional patterns of the Muhu Islands and each square meter of the airport is either sponsored by an Estonian company or decorated (and regularly renewed) with cultural or historical references (Pawlusz – Polese 2017).

Inasmuch as Scandinavia and the Nordic countries are associated with effective administrations, honesty and good conditions for business, the Nordic narrative could be used to convince potential investors and businessmen that Estonia is worth their attention. As Estonian IT companies are small, fast, and innovative, and Estonia is no stranger to cutting edge companies such as Skype and Transferwise, the role of Estonian IT companies is well promoted by the idea of Estonia as an “internet country”, where all aspects of public life can be managed online. In the pre-smartphone era, and before Skype was bought by Microsoft, Tallinn Airport had a Skype booth, from which passengers could log into their

account and call their friends across the world. Many of them might not know where the country is, but they were using its technological products. This makes it possible to brand the country as reliable, fast and digitally up to the expectations that a modern nation might generate. The narrative, and the strategic sequence of events and innovations leading to its definition, come from a long march allegedly started in 1997. By then, Estonia had already formed a vision of moving to e-Governance and as early as in 2000, its transition to e-taxation had started. According to the official e-Estonia government website, nowadays 99% of tax declarations in the country are filed electronically. The country further progressed in 2002 with the idea to provide all citizens with a digital ID and the launching of the e-Health project in 2008. Thanks to the e-Health technologies, doctors can access patients' data online, and issue certificates and exchange information via the internet when necessary. A particular place in the official narrative is occupied by how Estonia survived the 2007 cyberattacks in such a way that it paved the way to its becoming possibly the most cyber-secure country on the planet (BBC 2017).

Grounded in all these improvements, in 2014 Estonia introduced the e-Residency programme, which is defined on the official e-Residency website as "*Estonia's gift to the world*" (E-Residency 2020). In practice, any individual, regardless of their residency or nationality, can apply for a virtual residency card through this programme. The card gives its holder no rights to enter the Estonian territory and thus cannot be considered a fast track for a visa or residence permit for non-EU nationals. However, it gives the holder access to a broad series of services of which the most important is the national company register. There are some formal limitations to entering a company in the register such as the need to provide a physical address in Estonia for the company and the need to demonstrate that its business activity is somehow linked to Estonia.<sup>3</sup> But virtually anyone can register a company in the country, manage it through the highly-effective e-bureaucracy,<sup>4</sup> pay taxes and salaries for it and perform any kind of operation related to it, with the exception of opening a bank account, for which physical presence is required.

Estonian e-Residency currently counts over 50.000 beneficiaries, of which over ten percent are Finland residents but over 20 percent come from Germany, Japan, the UK and the US (between 5–6 percent per each country) (Xolo 2017). The largest number (725) of companies established through the programme are owned by Ukrainian residents. However, Germany is second in this respect with 630 companies, and it is followed by Russia, Finland and France, whose residents have also been very active in the programme (with 603, 423, and 421 companies, respectively). If, on the one hand, the interest of businessmen from more unstable environments (e.g. Russia, Ukraine) in the programme can look normal somehow, on the other hand, the attention from countries that allegedly have liberal and investment-friendly business environments can be used as a proxy for the importance the programme and the country are gaining.

By force of these figures, Estonia has been able to claim credit for its accessibility and readiness to be part of the globalized world. Its promotional campaign has officially engaged with most of the issues major world actors have been dealing with: business, immigration (especially of a highly qualified skilled workforce), and domestic and international tourism, the latter of which was possibly considered to be the most important area of application (as well as being the main focus of our research), given its large potential. Informing people of the existence of the country is already an achievement, given its size, location and population. However, convincing a growing number of people to participate in the programme (the e-Residency programme receives 200–300 applications per week) was only possible thanks to a targeted and aggressive campaign emphasizing the major role technology has at the daily level in Estonia. The Estonian nation branding has been making use of words like "cosy" and "homy" and embedded the concept of technology and nature within itself, thus uniquely mixing modernity and tradition. Estonia's

message to the world can be regarded as sufficiently loud and convincing given the number of people investing there and moving their businesses there from allegedly stable and friendly environments. As a result, not only has the campaign received attention from market actors, but it has also conveyed a sense of security, eventually enhancing the diplomatic status of the country at the European level. In other words, the EU has nurtured a growing confidence in the country to the point of granting it the task of managing the EU IT Agency. In addition, a growing number of countries and personalities from all over the world have been praising Estonia for its digital innovation capacity.

### **GENUINE AND NATURAL: NATIONAL(ISTIC) RECIPES**

If “you are what you eat” is a widely recognized statement across cultures worldwide, it would not be too inaccurate to say that Estonia and Estonians are (partly) made of marketing. Estonian official narratives, like those of Latvia and Lithuania, have been explicitly premised on the notion of a rupture with the Soviet past (Eglitis 2004), with the Soviet period considered as an unnaturally bleak one that overruled the “natural” course of history of an otherwise splendid and flourishing nation.

But Estonian food narratives are trapped in a major ambiguity. On the one hand, certain kinds of food can easily be associated with the Soviet period because they were traditionally prepared for special celebrations (e.g. the new year) in Soviet times, so they might be worth “forgetting”. On the other, some foods that were consumed in Soviet times were widely popular in Estonia even prior to the Soviet annexation and are still considered as part of the “Estonian everyday”. Estonian national narratives have quickly liquidated a number of references to the past through actions that have sometimes been widely contested, such as the removal of the Bronze Soldier statue (Ehala 2009). But removing a statue is not as difficult as removing food and cultural references to the Soviet culinary past. Attempts have been made to take distance from Soviet-style cooking but not necessarily its ingredients by diverting attention to their nutritional qualities, their natural preparation or their production on a small scale in a chain that goes from the producer to the consumer (Polese – Seliverstova 2019). Modes of re-inventing Estonian cuisine have ranged from “nationalizing” to “modernizing” a product or an ingredient to a “change in the intentions” behind that very ingredient, or the related recipe or lifestyle. In the first group, one can find the use of soups such as *solyanka* or *borshch* but also dishes like pelmeni. These foods have not necessarily been imported during Soviet times (foods know no administrative borders) but they may be regarded as reminders of the period so one might want to be careful about their use. A recent exhibition titled “Soviet Estonia” interestingly and methodically collected memorabilia of the Soviet past to show them to new generations and curious tourists. As the displayed items ranged from home-made automobiles to models of Soviet shops and Soviet apartments, Estonia-made films and curiosities related to music, the visitor could learn a lot about the past. However, in the same exhibition, marinated vegetables and a number of other items present in modern day kitchens, were somehow presented as belonging to the past (Polese 2019). This reminds one somehow of the observations in the seminal work *Cultural Intimacy* (Herzfeld 2014), which has been found to have application in IR theory (Subotic – Zarokol 2013). In this work, Herzfeld discussed the discourse he encountered amongst Greeks surrounding the way in which they repudiated the tradition of breaking dishes at weddings. He was told that this practice was something obsolete, anachronistic, or, simply, unmodern and that its very persistence denied the thirst for modernity his interlocutors wished for their country. What is important to note, though, is that they did not deny the tradition or its reality. Rather, they tried to modify or distort the way in which this tradition was perceived by outsiders. In this way, Herzfeld’s interlocutors could claim to have an attachment to parts of their tradition when they viewed them positively, while also denying them, in part,

when they wished to promote a perception by others that would confirm their modernity. In other words, they tried to construct a narrative that would help others believe what they desired them to believe.

The Estonian modernization of recipes has benefited from the momentum of the healthy food industry, in which buckwheat (in Estonian, *tatar*), which is widely used in Estonian cuisine, has been widely praised as good for one's body. Estonian cuisine has thus maintained an ingredient whose use dates back farther than Soviet times, though it was widely used during that period but embellished with a mishmash of ingredients to reach creations such as "buckwheat risotto", which is an elaboration of the Soviet "*grechka*". Another attempt to display a higher degree of modernity is visible in the associations of Estonia with Nordic cuisine and the way that Estonian food products and food habits are promoted in official national media sources and incorporated in the phenomenon of Estonia's nation branding as a Nordic nation (Jordan 2014a).

Another interesting change in the domestic narratives can be named "change of intentions": we do the same thing we used to do in Soviet times but we ascribe it to different intentions. Use of hand-picked ingredients such as berries and mushrooms was relatively common for home cooking in Soviet times, sometimes due to lack of availability of goods in the shops. This habit is still performed nowadays but the act is justified through a different logic. In state-printed tourist brochures, Estonians are depicted as nature lovers that love to go skiing in winter and take long walks to collect berries and mushrooms in the woods; "... *these selected everyday activities (which have economic potential) create a national hyper-reality [...] the perception that there is something like 'Estonianness' that binds the population*" (Pawlusz – Polese 2017: 9). The act of picking food this way, by force of this association, becomes a marker of Estonianness. It is no longer a necessity dictated by the political and economic situation but an individual choice. Cooking hand-picked ingredients thus becomes rather the natural consequence of an individual performing Estonianness by paying a tribute to its nature.

All the above ideas converge into the suggestive narrative behind the creation of the website Estonian Food, which pertains to Estonian national cuisine and products, and was launched by the Estonian Ministry of Rural Affairs. The site defines Estonian food as "*a tasty reflection of thousand-year-old traditions, pure nature and smart producers*" (Eesti toit 2020), contributing to the imagination of national food ingredients, symbols and practices with which Estonian citizens might associate themselves and through which the imagination of the Estonian nation might be facilitated. In contrast to Soviet practices of mass-production and industrialization, in this case, Estonia is depicted as a country of small family businesses producing high-quality products. Food goes from the (Estonian) people to the (Estonian) people via the (Estonian) land; it is natural and healthy. According to the website, Estonian food is seasonal and significantly varies across seasons throughout the year. If this can be seen as a natural consequence of the fact that the difference in temperature between summer and winter is significant, it is also a way to align with the latest tendencies of healthy eating and construct the narrative of a smart nation and people (e.g. eat seasonal, eat local, eat bio, the Zero Kilometer trend). In line with this, the section on ingredients also emphasizes the care of the people for each single animal, their produces, and the products of nature in the country. For one thing, the vegetable section reads:

*Estonians have always loved to grow different kinds of roots, tubers, vegetables, fruit and berries. As most of the population lives in urban areas with little space for garden plots, then options such as growing fruit trees in the backyards of apartment block buildings, little urban greenhouses and growing simpler vegetables on windowsills are gaining popularity* (Eesti toit 2020).

The country, it seems, has found some kind of balance between large and small producers, thus leaving room for initiatives such as large and economically-effective factories with modern production means while finding a way to value and maintain its traditions. For instance, the section on bread explains that:

*The first Estonian bread industries were established already in the 19th century and Estonia's oldest bread industry, Leibur, is already more than 250 years old. The industries today manufacture around 90% of the entire Estonian bread production, however, the number of small bakeries and farms whose produce ends up on supermarket shelves is also on the rise, as they offer variety (Eesti toit 2020).*

The website indeed puts an accent on the fact that Estonian food is produced both industrially (but by producers that are strictly controlled and devoted to delivering the best possible quality) and by small farms that allow Estonians to remain in touch with nature, express their individuality and perpetuate their traditions. All these points are endorsed by famous personalities in the food and restaurant industry, and by the sections on recipes and culinary roads of Estonia. What is even more important, however, is the website's visual aspect with carefully edited high-quality pictures to give the visitor a visual experience that they can almost feel, smell and touch. The pictures are inviting and all the foods look extremely delicious and tempting.

Beyond state-driven narratives, and surfing on the wave of these deep efforts, private and market actors have started expanding the scope and the role of food in Estonia. Not only was an Estonian food museum opened in 2017 but many companies have started encouraging what has been called "patriotic consumption" (Polese – Seliverstova 2019) to appeal to people who feel proud to reproduce state narratives on their kitchen table. The local food industry often promotes its products by using national symbols in two main ways. One is to decorate the package with national patterns or colours. The other approach is using catchy and evocative words when describing the product. Words and phrases like "authentic", "ecologically pure", "with no preservatives", or "real" and "native" (used when describing the flavour) are widely used. This strategy gives continuity to the attempts to create associations between Estonia and its inhabitants by labelling the country as technological but committed to nature and confirming the special relationship that Estonians allegedly have with nature (Polese – Pawlusz 2017b). This construction of patriotic food can be regarded as something started by entrepreneurs using elements of national folklore to make their products more attractive to customers. It originates within the business sector but matches state-led attempts to create a relationship with food, its production and its marketing, thus opening the door to "de-exclusivizing Estonianness". If for nation-building, language and ethnic belonging can make the Estonian identity restricted to a circle of people who can flag it by displaying it at social occasions, and limit the rights of others to feel Estonian, consumption enlarges the circle of people showing support for Estonia. Estonianness and support for a national project thus become more inclusive and it is possible to feel a bit more Estonian by force of the fact that one buys certain categories of products perceived as genuine, local or representative of national values.

## **CONCLUSION: QUO VADIS, ESTONIA**

"We are what we pretend to be," wrote Kurt Vonnegut on the cover page of his novel *Mother Night* (1999). This is not only a leitmotiv of human life, but also of nations, states, and societies. States have always sought to project an image for outsiders to achieve their policy goals. One only needs to think of Versailles and Louis XIV's desire to promote the grandeur of France and its importance and centrality in Europe. In more modern times,

world fairs and other such events were used to construct narratives about the nation and its identity for global consumption (Smits – Jansen 2012). After the Second World War, state leaders and corporate marketing forces first conceived of what has become known as the nation branding industry as they reimagined “*the space of the nation as a valuable resource in the growing competition for global investment, trade, and tourism*” and began to utilize “*national culture and territory [...] as marketable and monetizable entities*” (Aronczyk 2013: 3).

The countries which have emerged from the post-socialist spaces of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union have, to varying degrees, sought to present themselves in a similar manner – to shed their Soviet-era pasts for external consumption and be what they pretend to be. A key way in which this has been done is through the act of *nation branding*, which uses corporate marketing techniques to increase a state’s “*national visibility and legitimacy*” or, to put it more prosaically, “*to make the nation matter,*” in an increasingly competitive global environment (Aronczyk 2013: 3). It is largely undertaken by governments and industries in order for them to more effectively compete internationally for marketing purposes, such as boosting trade and tourism or attracting foreign investment. This contrasts with the official nation-building process, which is primarily about creating domestic solidarity through identity formation and value promotion, through which the identities and values are internalized within the state’s population.

In this respect, nation branding has been particularly important for post-socialist spaces which “*have massive image problems*” connected to their communist pasts (van Ham 2001: 5) which paint them as economically backward and socially retrograde, and as poor investments. Consequently, they have had difficulty competing with and in Western markets. The mix of tools and approaches used to produce a winning image of the country in Estonia is admirable. In a comparative perspective, Estonia seems to be much more advanced than its Baltic counterparts in promoting its image, let alone its post-Soviet neighbours. In many respects, this is a unique case – a country of a little more than a million people going to explain to Germany or Argentina how digitalization of governance has worked for it and how the same tools it used might improve the other country’s quality of life.

From a scholarly perspective, the present article opens at least two new avenues of research. First, although the most visible cases of nation branding have been documented, an academic article cannot possibly document the full complexity and variety of tools and approaches used in it. In previous studies, attention has been put on the way consumption (Seliverstova 2017), collective singing (Pawlusz 2017) and tourism brochures have been used to convey a message and a perception of the given country. But the variety of places where elements of nation branding can be found is broader. Accordingly, this paper is an invitation to look for messages and images of a country in places that are not necessarily obvious or have not been explored so far. Since Billig’s banal nationalism, scholars have attempted to look at the way identity and perceptions of a country can be deduced from a large array of elements that are not always immediately visible. We invite researchers interested in the issue to look in this direction. Second, inasmuch as history and geography matter, what is the role of a given people’s history and geographical position regarding the kinds of tools and messages that their country decides to deliver? Is the nation branding/building strategy of Estonia replicable elsewhere? Would any other country be willing to take it as an example, or can messages and tools of nation branding only work, to a fair extent, in the context where these messages were originally conceived?

<sup>1</sup> For instance there is the target added value of 2.1 bn euros to be created by EE clients by 2023, and 1.5 bn in foreign investments should be reached by the same year (Enterprise Estonia 2020).

<sup>2</sup> The value matrix is also repeated in a separate domestic marketing strategy (titled “I love Estonia”) and is officially available in the Marketing Concept for Tourism leaflet (Enterprise Estonia 2012).

<sup>3</sup> The programme description clearly highlights that this is not just a way to take advantage of the Estonian tax regime, as the company should have a real reason to be established in the country. Theoretically, one is not allowed to register a company in Estonia to export, say, German machines to Congo since there is no formal reason for such a company to be based in Estonia.

<sup>4</sup> As an indicator, one could consider the average time needed to register a company once one is in possession of an e-Residency card: eighteen minutes.

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