Weekly Briefing

Estonia social briefing:

Handling the crisis as a society: a bit of history and a proposal to WHO

E-MAP Foundation MTÜ

Handling the crisis as a society: a bit of history and a proposal to WHO

In a normal year, for the whole Estonian society, the end of May would be, with necessity, meaning that the country is in full speed to get ready for the upcoming *Jaanipäev* (Midsummer Day), which has been celebrated in Estonia for as long as history can tell. Still with the *Jaanipäev* in mind, nobody in the country treats 2020 as a normal year. This is definitely the right moment in time when a leading personality seizes the opportunity to generalise on the country's societal matters. Kersti Kaljulaid, the current Estonian President, has arguably been known for being spot on in detecting such opportunities, and she did not miss it this time either. While giving her interview to Estonia's major media source, *Postimees*, the President praised the country's society for handing the crisis "brilliantly":

> I have been teaching social education classes weekly and treated the crisis as an example of how society is the sum of everyone's actions. It seldom happens that we learn the sum of all of our actions in just two weeks. Just because the emergency situation has ended does not mean this is no longer true. People would do well to sit apart at concerts and avoid crowding in front of the stage. Luckily, there is enough room in Estonia, which has worked to our advantage in this crisis, compared to Central Europe where high population density restricted people's movement even more.[1]

Most probably, the true sense of normality will be gradually returning to the Estonian society when the people get reminded about important dates and events they used to celebrate or commemorate in an ordinary year. For example, the upcoming Estonian National Flag anniversary (on 4 June) will definitely be one of those crucial reminders, considering the level of sincere respect the whole society pays to the Estonian blue, black and white tricolour. As for the May-linked events of the same or similar nature, it was reported that the film section of the National Archives (*Riigiarhiiv*) were given about 6,000 original camera negatives that were taken by a KGB agent in the period from 1987 to 1991, during the Estonian 'Singing Revolution' and when the Soviet Union was visibly adopting its collapsing mode[2] (see some of the images shown below).

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[1] Kersti Kaljulaid in Aimar Altosaar, 'The crisis brought out what was already there', *Postimees*, 1 June 2020. Available from [https://news.postimees.ee/6986463/the-crisis-brought-out-what-was-already-there].

[2] 'Gallery: Thousands of KGB-snapped singing revolution photos enter archives' in *ERR*, 21 May 2020. Available from [https://news.err.ee/1092534/gallery-thousands-of-kgb-snapped-singing-revolution-photos-enter-archives].

Author: Riigiarhiiv

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There is a truly remarkable story behind the process of taking these images – as noted in the report, "[t]he individual who shot the photos methodically, at the same time trying to hide his actual employer, called himself 'Oleg'"[3]. These days, he, a 63-year-old former KGB officer who was born in Estonia, received some army training on encryption and then joined the KGB via voluntary application in the 1970s to serve at the main security agency of the former USSR in the field of secret surveillance, agreed to give an interview *incognito*. Secret surveillance was

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[3] 'Gallery: Thousands of KGB-snapped singing revolution photos enter archives'.

something he had done for years, never wearing any uniform and never letting his wife know about what he was actually doing[4].

For those people who are into history – especially, the historical segment when Estonia was on its way to regain the country's independence after a half-a-century occupation by then one of the world's super-powers – the presented images are simply priceless. In a meticulous way, they 'recorded' **the** time as well as the societal actions of very different socio-political groups, from the pro-independence clusters of the society to the distinctly pro-Soviet movements. For example, 'Oleg' was directly involved into surveillance of the very memorable events of 15 May 1990 – **three decades ago** – when a sizeable group of pro-Soviet residents of Estonia stormed *Toompea*, the upper part of the Estonian capital city's Old Town where the country's parliament situates. As stated, [w]hile several reports survived from the day […], alongside Edgar Savisaar's famous radio announcement "Toompea is under attack!", the KGB photographer managed to capture the precise moment when the [Estonian] blue-black-and-white [flag] was torn off the roof"[5]. Undoubtedly, the aforementioned images, which are now in possession of the National Archives, deserve to be studied with full attention to every single detail – an avalanche of memories will be brought up back to the country's multi-faceted society to re-live those days and years once again and, most probably, to treasure even more what the Republic of Estonia has managed to achieve since it had re-gained its independence.

Indeed, there is quite a bit that the Estonian society can present now to prove the point. For example, it could be its ability to efficiently lead the international community in the process of digitalising pretty much everything that can be digitalised. When it would be taken to overcome the COVID-19-generated super-crisis, the world is yet to learn how Estonia could quickly utilise its advantages as an e-state, having effectively re-directed *intra*-society communicational channels into the cyber world. Most probably because of that and if everything is done in strict accordance with a planned initiative, the World Health Organisation (WHO), which still has plenty to report to the international system on its actions at the beginning and during the crisis, may be adopting the so-called *X-Road®* system that is considered "the backbone of e-Estonia", allowing "the nation's various public and private sector e-service information systems to link up and function in harmony"[6]. Intriguingly, as declared, the system has been implemented in Finland, Faroe Islands, Iceland, Japan,

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[4] 'Gallery: Thousands of KGB-snapped singing revolution photos enter archives'.
[5] 'Gallery: Thousands of KGB-snapped singing revolution photos enter archives'.
[6] 'x-road®' in *E-Estonia.com*. Available from [https://e-estonia.com/solutions/interoperability-services/x-road/].

Kyrgyzstan, and some other nations, while similar technology that is based on the experiences of Estonia is also working in Namibia and Ukraine[7].

Closer to the WHO, as reported, Estonian Prime Minister Jüri Ratas who 'met' with Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the organisation's Director-General via video call, noted in a press-release that "Estonia will launch digital cooperation with the WHO"[8]. *Postimees* understood this particular initiative nothing short from "the global breakthrough the Estonian e-state has been waiting for"[9]. Marten Kaevats, National Digital Advisor from the Government Office of Estonia, called it "**an opportunity of a century**" and then noted that

> [i]n terms of exporting the digital state or sharing Estonia's experience, a larger project than this cannot be fathomed. […] This is clearly a lifelong project as we are talking about reimagining the entire planet's data communications and the legal framework that surrounds it.[10]

An informal consortium of software developers from Estonia and Finland (for example, Gofore, Guardtime, Helmes, Nortal, Roxnet, the E-State Academy, and some other establishments) are to develop "a data governance system based on dispersed data communication for the WHO"[11]. Arguably, both Estonia and Finland are proficient in what they are proposing on the UN level – it is known that different *X-Road*® ecosystems can be genuinely interlinked or federated, and in February 2018, the two Nordic neighbours established such a 'federation' for the benefit of their respective societies[12]. One of the immediate benefits, from 21 January 2019, Finland-issued digital medical prescriptions are valid in Estonia[13]. Kaevats continues:

> The problem on the international level today is that everyone is working on their own thing, there are many isolated silos that do not form a whole. What we are proposing is an integral digital data governance plan, complete with necessary tools and methods. That said, we are not exporting technology but rather data governance principles. We are trying to show that

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[7] 'x-road®'.

[8] Kaur Maran and Aarne Seppel, 'E-state preparing to conquer the world' in *Postimees*, 15 May 2020. Available from [https://news.postimees.ee/6974268/e-state-preparing-to-conquer-the-world].

[9] Maran and Seppel.

[10] Marten Kaevats in Maran and Seppel.

[11] Maran and Seppel.

[12] 'x-road®'.

[13] 'Finnish digital prescriptions valid in Estonia from Monday' in *ERR*, 21 January 2019. Available from [https://news.err.ee/902486/finnish-digital-prescriptions-valid-in-estonia-from-Monday].

a dispersed data architecture such as what is used by our X-Road can be used by international organisations.[14]

In a way, Estonia, a technologically-advanced society of people who do not like wasting precious time and do not have a habit to waste its people's lives, is proposing to the WHO something that the organisation did not have at the moment when it was needed so badly – interoperability of systems. If it was only for that reason Estonia had entered the UN Security Council as a non-permanent member and only for two years, the country has already had its ultimate success. Now, it is up to the WHO to choose listening to the smart.

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[14] Kaevats in Maran and Seppel.