Andrew Keen in Tallinn, Estonia

Toomas Hendrik Ilves spent 10 years building nation's vision of open government and says it wants to make it 'impossible to do bad things' on the internet.

It's not often that a European head of state uses the "radical postmodernist philosophy" of Jacques Derrida and Jean Baudrillard to bash a hostile superpower. But then Toomas Hendrik Ilves, Estonia's defiantly erudite president of nearly 10 years, is no ordinary head of state.

Ilves is trying to reinvent Estonia as the brightly lit antithesis of Russia, and in today's confessional age of Edward Snowden, WikiLeaks and the Panama Papers, claims he is baking transparency and accountability into a new kind of digital civic operating system.

Ilves is known for his controversial opinions on everything from Snowden and internet privacy to cyberwarfare and Vladimir Putin's postmodernist state, which have apparently, transformed the 63-year-old into a "regional sex symbol".

Aivar, my Uber driver, chatters enthusiastically about Ilves as his grey Volvo sedan drops me outside Kadriorg Palace in Tallinn. "Enjoy our president. He's quite a character."

An imposing 18th-century baroque jewel, Kadriorg was built in the Estonian capital by Peter the Great for his wife, Catherine. The tsar, however, would not have been amused by Ilves and his outspoken criticism of Russia. Ilves greets me in his trademark checkered bow tie.

The problem with Putin's Russia, Ilves insists, is that the truth has been entirely devalued. Quoting from Peter Pomerantsov's 2015 Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible, the Estonian president says that "all truths have become equivalent" in contemporary Russia.

According to Ilves, the country is being run by postmodernists such as Putin's chief of staff, Vladislav Surkov, a "big fan" apparently of Baudrillard, who stage-manages Russia as if it was a murky reality television show. The result, Ilves says, is the death not only of truth but also of trust and accountability – the core currencies of a modern democratic state. Thus the proliferation of Russian troll factories that churn out anonymous comments that are poisoning the internet.

There is nothing small, charmingly or otherwise, about Ilves. If, as Marshall McLuhan suggested, we now live in an electronic global village, then the Swedish-born and American-educated Estonian president, with his nearly 70,000 Twitter followers is a kind of global village elder, dispensing his own cosmopolitan brand of personalized wisdom to anyone that will listen.

But it's not all bluster. Much of his presidential tenure, as well as previous roles as foreign minister, ambassador to the US and a member of the European parliament in the post-Soviet era, has been focused on making Estonia less village-like, on coming up with a grand idea that would enable this little Baltic republic to punch above its analog weight on the world stage.

Ilves came up with this grand idea a quarter of a century ago. When Gorbachev pulled the Soviets out of Estonia in 1991, Ilves asked himself a simple question about the future of a country that had been brutally occupied by its eastern neighbor for a half-century.

"What do we have?" Ilves asked himself about a country not much larger than Israel with a population less than half that of Silicon Valley.

His answer was equally simple. What the 1.3 million Estonians had, Ilves concluded in 1991, was technology. He recognized that the Soviets, despite their appropriation of most of Estonia's wealth, had bequeathed a decent educational legacy, especially in mathematics. Estonia's future, Ilves thus imagined a quarter of a century ago, was hi-tech, especially personal computers and the internet.

Ilves – a trained psychologist with degrees from Columbia and the University of Pennsylvania –

is also self-schooled in computer science. He proudly recalls learning to program as a 13-year-old schoolboy in New Jersey and being among the first geeks to own Apple's iconic 2E personal computer. By 1993, he was already arguing that Estonia "should computerize all schools" and by 1997 had championed putting all Estonian schools online and establishing publicly funded internet centers around the country.

Size matters, Ilves figured about Estonia's new role in a post-cold war, multipolar world. In the mid-90s he claims to have "reverse-engineered" Jeremy Rifkin's The End of Work, the 1995 bestseller arguing that information technology would undermine large-scale industrial production. What he calls his "backward reading" of Rifkin led him to recognize the importance of Estonia's miniature physical size in creating a substantial post-industrial economy, where a small, tightly knit hi-tech workforce of perpetually pivoting entrepreneurs could reinvent Estonia as the original startup nation.

Yet despite its multibillion-dollar success stories – including Skype, Playtech and more startups per person than anywhere else in the world – Estonia isn't just "E-Stonia", some Baltic version of Silicon Valley or Israel. The little Baltic republic – with the counterintuitive Ilves at its helm – is actually building something more ambitious than just another tightly knit ecosystem of entrepreneurs, investors and technologists.

Estonia is pioneering a model for a democratically transparent 21st-century networked society – the opposite of Putin's opaque virtual reality show – by giving everyone a digital license plate. "Our goal is to make it impossible to do bad things," he explains. "Six billion lanes, and nobody has a license plate except the Estonians."

Is Estonia becoming a 21st-century panopticon?

That is Ilves' grand – one might even say baroque – idea. Under his presidency over the past 10 years, Estonia has pioneered a series of technological reforms to not only bring everyone online but also to create a national database. The system is built around the online ID card, introduced in 2002, in which its citizens' information – from healthcare records to tax filings to educational qualifications to real estate documents – is stored in a seamlessly integrated national database.

But what about privacy in this database of its citizens' intentions, I asked. Surely he's creating a kind of 21st-century panopticon, a digital remix of Jeremy Bentham's 18th-century "simple idea of architecture" where people could be watched in everything they did?

"Our obsession with privacy is misguided," Ilves – who is, of course, anything but indifferent to 20th-century Big Brother surveillance regimes – insists. The Estonian system, he explains, is based on "trust". While the national database can be accessed by the authorities, he stresses, the citizen has to be notified when their records are observed. So if the system hasn't been built on Blockchain technology, it nonetheless operates on Blockchain-like principles – creating a data system that can't be altered with notifying both the authorities and citizens.

This is what Ilves calls a "Lockean contract" between digital citizen and the government. The 21st-century networked sovereign, he says, is the guarantor of what he calls "data integrity". While the government can't access our data without our knowledge, the citizen no longer has any anonymity in this system.

So everyone – from government to police to tax authorities to the citizens themselves – are transparent. Ilves sees this accountable system, the antithesis of Vladislav Surkov's opaque Russian reality television show, as being the essential foundations of a social contract for our networked age. It will, he believes, encourage responsible use of the internet. It may even flush out the trolls.

Rather than privacy from the state, the real concern, Ilves insists, is the integrity of data. Instead of worrying about somebody else knowing our blood type, we should be worried when they start "fiddling" with that data to change our blood type.

Snowden 'harmed the EU privacy debate'

This focus on data integrity is why Ilves is much less concerned with Snowden's NSA revelations than either last year's Office of Personnel Management (OPM) hack in which the

data of 21 million people was stolen, or with the ongoing fight between Apple and the FBI over a back door to the iPhone's data.

Ilves believes that paranoia over the Snowden revelations "harmed the debate" about privacy in the EU. The NSA, he quipped, wasn't "mining the deep packets of Bohemian poets sending emails to their girlfriends". In contrast, the OPM and Apple cases are both about trust. Giving the authorities a blanket and unverifiable back door on the iPhone, for example, means that citizens can no longer trust either their government or Apple.

Trust, then, particularly trust of both government and an accountable legal system, is the heart of the matter. That's why Ilves co-chaired Digital Dividends, a World Bank report published earlier this year which focuses on the need for developing nations to build the foundations of an accountable legal system first if they are to develop a thriving digital sector.

The Estonian model of digital development is "scalable", Ilves says, although he acknowledges that its political side is much easier to build in a small country like Estonia. But, in light of the revelations from Snowden and other whistleblowers, can we ever really trust the system – even in a tiny country like Estonia?

So what exactly does the Estonian secret service do, I ask Ilves as our interview comes to a close. "Track down Russian spies," the Estonian president answers nonchalantly before detailing the "brutal" postwar occupation of his country and Soviet destruction of 10m books between 1945 and 1946.

While he acknowledges that the threat of cyberwarfare has receded since the big cyberattacks in 2007 and that some of the contemporary paranoia about the Russian cyberthreat is "hyperventilated", he doesn't dismiss the threat of another occupation. After all, while Ilves might be able to make it "impossible for people to do bad things" in Estonia, this guarantee doesn't extend to what people do in Moscow.

That's why, Ilves explains, the Estonians are digitalizing all their indigenous books and shipping the data out of the country. "And that's why," he adds, smiling grimly, "we are in Nato."

"E-stonia: country using technology to rebrand itself as the anti-Russia", The Guardian
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