

Irish-Bulgarian Cultural Parallels

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Abstract

The similarities and the differences between the Irish and Bulgarian cultures are in the centre of interest of the paper. These are discussed along the lines of Hofstede's theory of culture, namely within the six dimensions as listed in his 2010th edition of "Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind. The observations illustrating certain theoretical points are based on the author's personal experiences during her two-year stay in Ireland where she worked as a lecturer at the School of Linguistics and Literature of Trinity College Dublin. In the conclusion a summary of the place of Ireland and Bulgaria on the cultural map of Europe is presented, which highlights the basic differences between the two cultures.

Keywords

Ireland, Bulgaria, culture, dimensions

Introduction

This paper brings to the fore issues that have been in the focus of interest of people and institutions whose benefits inevitably involve dealing with problems concerned with intercultural communication. These cultural issues are viewed as part of what M. Minkov (2002: 4-5) defines as a 'soft science'.

The paper is a result of my efforts to understand and analyze my emotions and feelings as a Bulgarian who had to work in an Irish academic environment between 2009 and 2011. As a researcher it was a challenge to try to find a more structured explanation of my own intuitive judgments of Irish people and behaviour that seemed unfamiliar or strange to me during my stay there. All examples below are based on my personal experiences I had during my two-year stay and work in Dublin as a lecturer at Trinity College, the University of Dublin established in 1654 by Queen Elisabeth I.

The theoretical framework used in this paper to discuss the differences and the similarities between Irish and Bulgarian cultures is also a result of my work as part of a team lecturing in a course entitled "Intercultural communication" within the Master's

programme of the Business School at TCD, which involved four teachers of four different cultural backgrounds: Irish, British, French and Bulgarian.

Theoretical background. Culture as an iceberg

The ‘cultural iceberg’ is a widely accepted metaphor illustrating the visible from the invisible differences between cultures. The basic idea behind it is that the formal aspects of a given culture are what the observer sees and evaluates against the facts and practices in their own culture. However, the overt aspects of a culture are simply a manifestation of the existence of factors set deep below the sea surface and invisible for direct observations. The latter encompass beliefs, moral values, assumptions, attitudes etc. This way, the overt aspects of a culture are seen as stemming from the hidden ones.

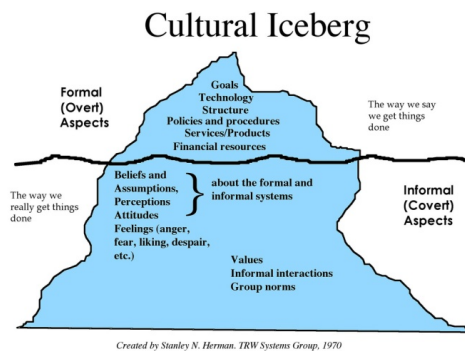


Fig. 1⁵³ **Cultural Indices after Hofstede 2010**

Hofstede’s theory is a theoretical model that has the potential to explain the mapping of the below-the-surface factors on what an observer sees on the surface as differences in behaviour and reactions of people belonging to a given culture in real life situations. The most important assumption in Hofstede’s theory is that culture presents a ‘software of the mind’ (2010: 53-296) which predetermines the

⁵³ Adopted from: <http://sandylearningblog.wordpress.com/2010/11/02/the-second-model-the-iceberg-model-of-workplace-dynamics/>
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individual's social behaviour. It involves "the patterns of thinking, feeling and potential acting [...] learned throughout the person's lifetime" (Hofstede 2010: 4).

The analysis conducted by Hofstede and his team allowed them to isolate six factors on the basis of which the world cultures are divided into groups. The six factors, commonly called indices, form six basic oppositions according to which cultures are classified:

- Individualism vs. collectivism (IDV)
- High degree vs. low degree of power distance (PDI)
- High vs. low uncertainty avoidance (UAI)
- Masculinity vs. femininity (MAS)
- Long term vs. short term orientation (LTO)
- Indulgence vs. restriction (IND)

Every culture can be measured, compared and contrasted to other cultures using scores that vary from 1 to 100. In the following discussion the parameters are presented as oppositions, concerning the major representations of the factors in the Bulgarian and Irish culture. They concern mainly the first three dimensions: individualism, power distance and uncertainty avoidance. As long as masculinity is concerned, data shows little difference between the two cultures and the discussion focuses on slight differences in the attitudes to particular problems of social importance. The same is the situation with the last two dimensions, namely, the long-term orientation and indulgence, although for a different reason. As these are relatively new, especially the last one, there is no statistical data to rely on in the comparison of the two cultures. This leads to presenting the author's subjective opinion, which is not duly supported by statistical data but to the best of the author's knowledge is a commonly shared belief in one or the other society.

Culture shock as an indicator of cultural differences

Culture shock is an indicator of differences between two cultures. Almost all anthropologists unanimously agree that the transition from one culture to another causes a culture shock. This is especially visible when the original and the target culture present extremes and the transition from one to the other is quick. Culture shock is indicated by the anxiety a person feels in a new environment that results from losing all familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse that are part of the original culture as the language one

speaks or the beliefs one accepts. Culture shock includes the ways in which one feels in the situations of daily life in a foreign culture. It can be caused by words, gestures, facial expressions, customs or norms and attitudes of the people in the host culture. The differences between the expectations and the reality are due to the differences between the original culture acquired by the majority of people in childhood, which are part of their culture as much as the mother tongue and the beliefs of the society they have grown in are. As Oberg states, we all depend on hundreds of such cues, most of which we are not consciously aware (Oberg 2006: 176).

Cultural Parallels

Individualism (IDV) is the degree to which individuals are integrated into groups. Bulgaria with a score of 30 is defined as a typical collectivistic society, meaning that the members of the family, the extended family or the extended relationships have as a basic value loyalty to the group. Loyalty in collectivistic societies is paramount and controls societal rules including the employer-employee relationships, which are perceived in moral terms rather than in managerial ones. The boss is expected to perform the role of a benevolent father. Ireland, on the opposite, scores 70 points on this dimension. Hiring and promotion decisions are based on the achievements of the employees, who are free to display initiative. For comparison, the USA scores highest with 91, and Guatemala scores lowest on this dimension with only 6 points.

Collective vs. Individualistic Cues

Bulgaria	Ireland
"We" – consciousness	"I" – consciousness
Languages in which the word "I" is avoided	Languages in which the word "I" is indispensable
Others classified as in-group or out-group	Others classified as individuals
Relationship prevails over task	Task prevails over relationship
Opinions and votes predetermined	Personal opinion: one person one vote
Stress on belonging	Right to privacy

As seen from the figures and the chart above, Bulgaria and Ireland are typical representatives of collectivist and individualist cultures,

respectively. The difference is seen on most occasions in social interaction, in both personal relations and at the workplace. Sharing a flat in Ireland does not necessarily mean sharing the household chores like dishwashing and cleaning. This is a matter of personal decision. If the flat mates are inclined to participate, they do so. If not, they do not. The right to privacy is immanent regarding private rooms. In case any of the flat mates wants to invite their friends over, the use of the shared spaces is previously discussed and arrangements are made so that the privacy of the flat mate is secured. Each of the flat mates has their own life, companies and appointments, which rarely involve the other. Living with someone, even for a long time, does not mean they are close friends, quite opposite of the situation in Bulgaria or even when two Bulgarians live together in Ireland. The latter usually tend to stick together and rarely mix with the local people, especially if it comes to spending their free time. It can be summarized that Bulgarians in Ireland quickly become friends and relations are limited mostly within the Bulgarian diaspora.

Power distance (PDI) is defined as the extent to which the less powerful accept and expect that power is distributed equally. This index allows dividing cultures into two extreme types: consultative (or democratic), as opposed to paternalistic (or autocratic).

Bulgaria scores 70 points, which is relatively very high on this dimension, meaning that the Bulgarian society generally tends to agree that inequality is inherent and centralization of management is inevitable. The higher the position of the individual in the societal hierarchy the more important they are for their subordinates. Thus Bulgaria is placed among the cultures that tend to be paternalistic or autocratic, in opposition to Ireland, which is a representative of the consultative type of culture, scoring 25. For comparison, the country with highest power distance score is Guatemala, with 95 points. In this dimension Ireland presents a very low ranking, lower even in comparison with Great Britain with 35 and the USA with 40 points, meaning that the Irish society generally believes that people are born equal and relate to one another as equals regardless of the formal positions they take.

Large vs. Small Power Distance Cues

Bulgaria	Ireland
Power is a basic fact of society antedating good or evil: legitimacy is irrelevant Subordinates expect to be told what to do Students are taught respect and obedience Teacher-centered education	Use of power should be legitimate and is subject to criteria of good and evil Students are treated as equals Student-centered education Subordinates expect to be consulted

It has often been pointed out that individualism and power distance are co-related. Individual cultures usually present societies with lower power distance, while collective cultures commonly share larger power distance. Bulgaria and Ireland are almost extremes along this dimension. The combination between individualism and power distance explains why the relations between teachers and students are extremely close, compared to the Bulgarian academic environment. The students in Ireland do not fear to ask questions, to give opinions and to demand to see their tutors any time they need consultation or advice as students and teachers are considered to be equal as individuals. It is a well-known fact that in the Anglo-Saxon academic environment students address their teachers by their Christian name avoiding titles and degrees, a situation that would be unthinkable in the Bulgarian cultural environment. Education both at school and university is focused on every individual student. Every person in the work place, being equal to the others is judged according to their individual merits independently of the administrative position they take as there is no differentiation between prestigious and low-status working tasks. Team work is based on consensus and consultations involving people of different ranks, who are equal.

Uncertainty avoidance (UAI) refers to the society's tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity and the extent to which people try to minimize uncertainty in order to avoid anxiety. Cultures with high UAI tend to strive for a strictly structured and predictable environment based on well-formulated rules.

It is estimated that Latin American, Southern and Eastern European countries score the highest on this dimension. Bulgaria has 85 points showing a very high preference to avoiding uncertainty, meaning that the society is quite intolerant to unorthodox behaviour

and innovations and tends to see security as an important element of the individual's personal and social life. Ireland scores 35, equalling the UK, and takes the lower levels on this dimension signalling that creativity and new approaches to solving problems are a priority in the Irish society.

High vs. Low Uncertainty Avoidance Cues

Bulgaria	Ireland
Uncertainty is felt as a continuous threat that must be fought Higher stress, emotionality, anxiety, neuroticism Lower scores on subjective health and well-being What is different is dangerous Teachers supposed to have all the answers Punctuality is important	Uncertainty is accepted as inherent in life and each day is taken as it comes Ease, lower stress, self-control, low anxiety Higher scores on subjective health and well-being What is different is curious Teachers may say 'I don't know' Punctuality is an exception

The uncertainty avoidance factor is closely related to the previous two. The high or the low index can show significant differences in the social behaviour typical of a given culture. The low UAI in Ireland, combined with individualism and short power distance explains why the Irish are very friendly with strangers and easily make contacts in an unfamiliar social environment. Exchanging greetings on the street, starting a conversation with strangers in queues, showing interest in other people's lives is typical behaviour for the Dubliners. One interesting fact is that it is customary on Dublin bus lines to greet the bus driver and take good-bye with them when you get on and off the bus. Acting otherwise is considered rude and is not tolerated by passengers. On the contrary, rarely, especially in urban societies, will a Bulgarian start a conversation with a stranger on the street or the bus.

Health is an important topic in Ireland and everybody speaks easily about their own health problems. Everybody is eager to help with advice or provide consultancy on health matters even when they may be of a very serious character. In Bulgarian culture, health is usually a taboo in a company where people do not know each other very well.

Another important facet is that teachers in Ireland are not expected to have answers to all questions. In the teaching process, which is student-centered, as mentioned above, the teacher is seen as part of a team where he works on problem-solving issues together with the students. Teachers do not perceive themselves as the ultimate authority that has the answers to all questions. In Bulgarian culture, on the contrary, both students and parents see teachers as ‘know-all’ people. If a teacher admits they do not know the answer to a question they put their reputation at risk as students are very likely to lose confidence in them. Bulgarian teachers expect respect from their students; they act as if they were flawless and tend to perceive themselves as the highest example of expertise for both students and parents. This prevents them from admitting they do not know something.

Another eloquent example is the behaviour of the Irish people and the Bulgarians when invitations to parties or other social events are concerned. It is unusual for a Bulgarian to go to a party on their own without knowing somebody there. What is more, when abroad, Bulgarians tend to stick together and generally avoid contacts outside the group.

One additional aspect of UAI is related to punctuality. It should be admitted that in this respect the Irish culture allows more freedom than the Bulgarian culture. It was shocking to me that the Irish are very tolerant to people who are late for an appointment and readily accept any kind of excuses even such that are judged ridiculous in Bulgaria such as “Sorry, my dog was sick”.

Place of BG and Ireland according to IDV, PDI and UA parameters

Type of cultur	COUNTRIES					
Collective	Singapore Jamaica	China, Vietnam, India	Iran, Trinidad	Ecuador, Arab world Thailand	Mexico, Brazil, Croatia	Serbia, Slovenia, <u>Bulgaria</u> , Romania, Greece, Turkey, Russia

Individualist	Denmark, Sweden	<u>Ireland</u>	US, Canada, Australia, Slovakia, Estonia, Finland	Lithuania, Germany, Latvia, Canada – Quebec	Austria, Czech Rep., Italy, Hungary	Spain, Poland, Malta, France, Belgium
UAI score	5 - 25	25 - 45	45 - 50	50 - 65	65 - 85	85 - 105
UAI type	WEAK	MIDDLE		STRONG		

Masculinity (MAS) is often referred to as *quality of life* and is not related to gender. As a cultural dimension it refers to the distribution of the emotional roles between men and women. Masculine cultures tend to be more competitive and assertive, whereas feminine cultures place more value on quality of life. It has been noted that the distance between gender roles is more dramatic in masculine societies. Countries like Japan and Sweden take the extremes on the world cultural scale where Japan with score 95 is a typical masculine society, while Sweden with 5 is considered a typical feminine culture.

Quality of Life Cues

Femininity	Masculinity
Men and women should be modest and caring	Men should be and women may be assertive and ambitious
Balance between family and work	Work prevails over family
Sympathy for the weak	Admiration for the strong
Mothers decide on number of children	Fathers decide on family size
Both boys and girls may cry but neither should fight	Girls cry, boys don't; boys should fight back, girls shouldn't fight
Many women in elected political positions	Few women in elected political positions

Both Bulgaria and Ireland are considered to be masculine cultures taking relatively high positions with 66 and 68 points, respectively. In both societies competitiveness, materialism and ambition are seen as

more important than relationships and quality of life. There are several similarities between the two cultures. Devotion to family life nowadays is seen as as important as work for men who are more often involved in children's education compared to the past, when the societies were much more masculine. At present census data shows that the rate of births is growing in Ireland, while it is dramatically decreasing in Bulgaria most probably due to the low quality of life and the economic uncertainty.

Another feature is the striving for equality in social life with more women entering politics and taking higher ranks in the social hierarchy although the number of women in both countries is generally lower compared to men.

It seems that on one particular point Ireland seems to be more feminine compared to Bulgaria. This is when sympathy for the weak is concerned. Homeless people and beggars are part of the typical everyday picture both in Dublin and in Sofia. But the Irish and the Bulgarian attitudes to them are quite different. Passers-by in Dublin always have some change for the people in the street and, although beggars sit quietly at the rear of the street with a small notice in hands and often with a dog beside them, passers-by feel obliged to help with what they have in their pockets. What is more, helping beggars is an important part of the charity activities of the young people. It was striking for me the first time I saw groups of secondary school students who organize 'visits' to the homeless. Several youngsters sitting and speaking to a homeless person, holding a cup of hot tea, a sandwich, and sometimes even a cigarette, is a familiar sight on the streets of Dublin, which is unthinkable in Bulgaria.

Long-term orientation (LTO), often referred to as *Confucian dynamism*, is a relatively newly introduced dimension referring to 'time horizon'. It relates to the importance a given culture places on the future as opposed to the past, and the present immediate success. Long-term oriented societies attach more importance to the future, they are pragmatically oriented to rewards, persistence and capacity for adaptation, while in short-term oriented societies one's values are placed in the past, they show respect for tradition, social obligations are accepted as dominating over personal goals and face saving is very important. East Asian cultures are placed among the long-term oriented societies, e.g.: China – 118, Japan – 88. The dimension places

Anglo-Saxon countries together with the Muslim world and Latin America among the cultures with low-term orientation, while Eastern and Western European cultures are estimated as moderate. With its 43 points Ireland is definitely among the short-term oriented cultures. Bulgaria scores 38, which is even lower in comparison with Ireland.

Confucian Dynamism Cues

Long-term orientation	Short-term orientation
What is good and evil depends upon the circumstances Traditions are adaptable to changed circumstances Students attribute success to effort and failure to lack of effort Trying to learn from other countries	There are universal guidelines about what is good and evil Traditions are sacrosanct Students attribute success and failure to luck Supposed to be proud of one's country

Both countries are typically oriented to immediate success. However, it seems that there are significant differences between the attitudes to traditions and innovations. Traditionally Bulgarians are described as nihilistic. They are not proud of their own country and rarely boast with a glorious past. In Ireland traditions are sacrosanct and the Irish are generally proud of their history and make every possible effort to protect their cultural heritage.

Moral categories like good and evil in Ireland are universal, while in Bulgaria people tend to evaluate them according to the changing circumstances. Such a difference may be due to the different religious doctrines that are dominant in the two countries.

An interesting observation is the students' attitudes to success. Irish students strongly believe that hard work brings to success, which is a characteristic of the long-term oriented cultures, while Bulgarian students, on the opposite, generally accept success as a mere luck.

Indulgence (IND) is the latest index added to the classical five dimensions, namely in 2010 by M. Minkov, the Bulgarian representative on Hofstede's research team. It is related to enjoying life and having fun, as opposed to restraint and adherence to strict social norms. The index is related to the degree of happiness people feel and their freedom to voice opinions and give feedback. Unfortunately this dimension has not been supported by enough

statistical data, perhaps because the concept of ‘happiness’ is ambiguous and varies cross-culturally to a much higher extent than the other ones. However, observations so far have shown that indulgence tends to prevail in South and North America, in the Anglo-Saxon world, the Nordic countries and in parts of Sub-Sahara Africa, whereas restraint prevails in Eastern Europe, East Asia and in the Muslim world (Edelkoort 2013).

Restraint vs. Indulgence Cues

Bulgaria	Ireland
Fewer very happy people	Higher percentage of people declaring themselves very happy
Less likely to remember positive emotions	Likely to remember positive emotions
Helplessness: what happens to me is not my own doing	A perception of personal life control
Lower importance of leisure	Higher importance of leisure
In wealthy countries, stricter sexual norms	In wealthy countries, lenient sexual norms
Higher number of police officers per 100,000 population	Maintaining order in the nation is not given a high priority

My observations show that there are significant differences between the two countries with regard to this index, with Bulgaria belonging to countries with higher level of restraint and opposed to Ireland, where indulgence is more valued. Bulgarians tend to be quite pessimistic. Happiness is not their strength and is not a goal in their lives. Usually people in Bulgaria do not remember positive emotions, most often they complain that life is not fair, while most often the Irish attribute failure to lack of luck and see it as temporary. A common saying is “Sh*t happens” that is the explanation and that puts an end to further discussions on the topic.

The Irish people believe that they have control on their personal life and, as mentioned above, they believe that hard work and assertiveness bring a state of happiness. Leisure is more important in Ireland than in Bulgaria, which is most likely to be due to the better economic situation in Ireland compared to Bulgaria.

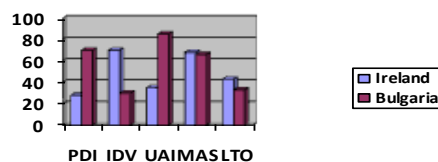
As far as sexual norms are concerned, contrary to expectations, it seems to me that people are more lenient in Bulgaria than in Ireland, although Ireland is economically a more developed country. Despite the data of the 2011 census showing that there is a rise in the number

of cohabiting couples in Ireland, in Bulgaria the demonstration of sexual relations in public is more visible.

Finally, it should be mentioned that, as far as police presence is concerned, Bulgaria takes the 8th position among the countries with highest number of police officers – 398,1 per 100, 000 inhabitants, whereas Ireland falls out of the listed 53 countries (Bloomberg 2013). What is more important than the numbers, however, are attitudes to the police, rooted most probably in the functions that police have historically fulfilled in the two countries. The police in Bulgaria, due most probably to the communist past, is perceived as an enemy and a threat by the people, while in Ireland they are the ones whose basic function is to protect the citizens. On one occasion I bumped into two police officers patrolling in my neighbourhood at 3 am and my first instinctive reaction was to escape, which, fortunately, I did not do. They just said “Hello”, and to my utmost surprise, asked me whether I wanted them to see me off to my house. This was one of the most awkward experiences during my stay in Ireland which made me feel both embarrassed and ashamed.

Comparative scales

As seen from the chart below, Bulgaria drastically differs from Ireland, being a collectivist culture, with high power distance index and high uncertainty avoidance. The only dimension two countries almost coincide on is masculinity. Unfortunately there are no officially published scores for Bulgaria concerning the sixth dimension. In order to complete the chart concerning the LTO index, data from Luka (2005: 6) is used⁵⁴.



⁵⁴ The data used in this article have been taken from the official site of G. Hofstede (The Hofstede Center 2013). However, it should be mentioned that sometimes the data in different studies slightly varies (Davidkov 2004).

The graphic above presents the first five dimensions separately. However, it should be borne in mind that there are logical correlations among the six dimensions, so that they cannot be seen as independent and absolute. On the contrary, they can overlap or work simultaneously, thus presenting various combinatory patterns.

Conclusion

The basic differences between the Bulgarian and Irish cultures lie along the lines of the first three parameters: power distance, individualism and uncertainty avoidance. The next two parameters: masculinity and long-term orientation do not show drastic differences between the two cultures. As for the newly added sixth parameter – indulgence, there is not enough statistical data to provide reliable grounds for comparison.

In an individualistic culture as Ireland, every person is accepted as an individual with their own rights. Combined with the low-power distance implying democracy and team work, a social loser in Ireland does not lose his/her individual rights and is treated as an equal. What is more, they spare their dignity and still feel part of the society, not outcasts, unlike in collectivist cultures, which treat social outcasts as outsiders, and hence enemies once they stop belonging to the ‘the group’.

The low level of uncertainty avoidance explains the Irish curiosity to everything that is unknown or foreign. ‘What is different or new is attractive’ is a leading principle in Irish behaviour. Every stranger is a new thing in life and raises curiosity.

Uncertainty avoidance combined with the respect for the individual explains the risk that a management will run by employing a new member of an already established team without intervening in their own decisions and letting them free to act. Formal hierarchy is not important and team work is fruitful as the general belief is that every member of the team will be judged against their personal achievements.

The lack of sufficient research for Bulgaria with respect to the fourth and the fifth dimensions (masculinity and long-term orientation) and the insufficient data for both Bulgaria and Ireland concerning the sixth dimension (indulgence) open good perspectives for further exploration within Hofstede’s cultural theory framework.

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