

The Czech and Slovak Republics: A cross-cultural comparison

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The paper attempts to compare the cultures of the Czech and Slovak Republic in a business environment. Establishing a list of cultural dimensions extracted from reputable models, the authors applied a systematic behavioural comparison of each country. The work of the authors was limited by two factors. Firstly, the cultural proximity of the countries provided many slight differentiations. Secondly, the analysis was hampered by the few of available cross-cultural statistics for the countries reviewed. The analysis showed that both countries have a narrow cultural gap and share many cultural traits. However, a few noticeable differences were isolated: Particularism, Specificism and Emotions display. Due to the lack of available reliable quantitative data about the Czech and the Slovak cultures, further research such as factor-analysis questionnaire is suggested.

1 Introduction

The Czech and Slovak Republics share a long common history and enjoy a rich connection with many mixed families. To many, cultural differences between the countries are often ignored, if not negated. Up to 200,000 Slovaks live in the Czech Republic while nearly 50,000 Czech are located in the country of their Eastern neighbour (SOSR 2016). Nowadays, they work together in local and international companies that often consider the two territories as a single market. Therefore, when asked about the differences between their cultures, most Czechs and Slovaks sincerely do not see any.

How to compare what used to be the same? It is a challenge to compare two cultures like the Czech's and Slovak's that used to be one for such a long time. Are differences actually deep, or only on the fringes of cultures? A thorough review is needed, as, to the knowledge of the authors, no academic article devoted exclusively to these two cultures exist. Most articles covering the Czech and Slovak Republics have been published in the immediate post-communist period (Shafik 1995; Garner and Terrell 1998; Filer et al. 1999) and very little studies have been conducted about their distinct cultural characteristics. For lack of available analysis, most sources present the two cultures as very close, if not similar.

Our purpose in this article is to apply the tools of cross-cultural studies, 14 cultural dimensions, to analyze two countries that shared a long history but became independent from each other 20 years ago. We shall display the cultural traits of the two countries and examine them for possible sources of misunderstanding.

2 Background information

The close partnership between the Slovak and the Czech nations started during the Austrian-Hungarian Empire when they fought against the same foes, the Austrians and Hungarians. The official marriage was declared on 28th October 1918 when the Czechoslovakia was established.

From then on, the Slovaks and Czechs have been collectively referred to as “the Czechoslovaks”. On 1st January 1993 the Czech and the Slovaks officially agreed to a “velvet divorce”. This term refers not only to the “Velvet revolution” which saw the country escape from the soviet control, but also to the warm atmosphere that prevailed when negotiating the separation. While the older generation still argues about this controversial political decision, the youngsters welcome this opportunity to easily study and work “abroad”. No language training is necessary as both languages are very close. A brotherhood feeling is still vivid at all levels of social and political life. This apparent proximity is still quite spread abroad as many identify the Slovak and the Czech Republics as “Czechoslovakia”, even if there are now two independent nations. At the diplomatic level, the Slovak and the Czech governments share their political opinions and delegations regularly visit each other to share good practices. Both countries are part of NATO and since 2004 members of the European Union. They frequently stay on the same political line concerning economical or international relations topics. Since 1991, together with Poland and Hungary, they form the Visegrád group, a political alliance of central European countries cooperating in a wide spectrum of fields.

Despite this apparent closeness, when asked about their satisfaction with the status of this situation, being two independent countries, polls confirm the satisfaction of both the Czechs and the Slovaks with this “velvet divorce” (Inštitút pre verejné otázky). The smaller of the two, Slovakia is proud of its “own” government, embassies and adopting euro. Slovaks have transformed their country “from a younger brother of the Czechs” to an independent and competitive partner. The competition nowadays is primarily on the economical level, with both countries aggressively attracting foreign investors. While the two countries are key partners to each other (Slovakia is the second export market of the Czech Republic and its third importer; the Czech Republic is also the second export market of Slovakia and its second importer (Observatory of Economic Complexity 2015)), they are both highly ranked in Foreign Direct Investment surveys with the Czech Republic attracting 475USD per capita in 2013 and not far away Slovakia with 396USD. (EUcham 2015) Despite having so much in common, it is clear the Czech and Slovak Republics are now two distinct countries with their own national interests. In the last 20 years, have they become two distinct cultures?

3 Methodology: Using cross-cultural management tools in international relations

Cross-cultural management is an interdisciplinary field that draws upon the results obtained in other humanities. Originating in ethnology and sociology (Hall 1966), it has developed in the last few decades by adapting the existing tools of psychology to analyzing and comparing corporate and national cultures (Kluckhohn 1961).

A series of worldwide country surveys have been conducted (Hofstede 1980; Trompenaars 1993; House et al. 2004) offering researchers and practitioners practical tools for comparing national cultures.

By “national culture”, cross-cultural management means ethno-national cultures, i.e. countries. Much debated among the community (McSweeney 2002; Hofstede 2002; Margarethe et al. 2012), this unit remains today the most commonly used to analyse similarities and differences in behaviours of groups of individuals belonging to various cultures, despite its shortcomings. Derived from the various models and tools developed by researchers, the existing cultural dimensions allow for the analysis of national cultures, most often with applications to international management. This factor analysis provides simple ways to situate the likelihood of a given behaviour by members of a particular culture when confronted with an identified situation between two extremes or axes. While the models using behavioural dimensions are numerous, the dimensions themselves are frequently the same (Dumetz et al. 2012). In this article, the authors attempt to use cultural

dimensions to analyse the business behaviours of individuals in Czech Republic and Slovak Republic. They also sourced their results in their own decade-long experience as cross-cultural consultants and lecturers. Because each cross-cultural model has its limits, and because each project needs a tailor-made selections of cross-cultural dimensions (Dumetz 2016), the authors selected, as a framework of the article, a list of various cultural dimensions not associated with specific models. The dimensions are extracted mainly from the Trompenaars model, the GLOBE project, and the Hofstede model. However, other sources such as the SIMM model, TMA, TMC and World Value Survey were explored as inspiration.

	Cultural Dimension	Original Model
1	Particularism vs. Universalism	Trompenaars 1993
2	Uncertainty Avoidance	Hofstede 1980
3	Diffuse vs. Specific	Trompenaars 1993
4	Trust	Covey 2008
5	Individualism / Collectivism	Hofstede 1980; Trompenaars 1993
6	Hierarchy	Hofstede 1980; House 2004
7	Achieved vs. Ascribed Status	Trompenaars 1993
8	Masculinity Index / Cooperation vs. Competition	Hofstede 1980; House 2004
9	Neutral vs. Emotional / Assertiveness	Trompenaars 1993; House 2004
10	Locus of control	Rotter 1966
11	Deductive / Intuitive thinking	Foster 2000
12	Past / Present time orientation	Kluckhohn 1961
13	Short / Long term orientation	Hofstede 1980
14	Monochronic vs. Polychronic	Hall 1973

Table 1: Cultural dimensions

Source: author

4 Cultural dimensions

Clearly, the Czech-Slovak relationship is not only strictly speaking cultural. However, cultural dimensions can be used to suggest fruitful indications as to the type of current relationship between the two nations.

4.1 Dimensions linked to relationships

Particularism/universalism is about choosing between agreed upon rules or bending existing rules to fulfil engagements in a relationship (Trompenaars 1993). Here lies a first difference, with the Slovaks displaying slightly more particularistic behaviours than the Czechs. Slovaks condition their business relationships with trust and sympathy more than the Czechs do. For instance, promotion criteria may value a lot professional competency but the ability to approach people and build private contacts might make a difference.

Yet, in both countries success depends greatly on connections with influential people. As a clear link exists between Particularism and corruption, both countries rank at the same level (56 for Czech Republic and 50 for Slovak Republic according to Transparency International (2015), hence confirming the proximity of the two cultures regarding their tolerance for cronyism and corruption in public affairs.

It is actually interesting to notice that to cooperate in the Czech Republic, the Slovaks often prefer to interact with the inhabitants of eastern part of the country, Moravia, geographically half-way between Prague and Bratislava. A cultural continuum runs from a rather universalistic Bohemia towards a more particularistic East of Slovakia with citizens of Košice, near the Ukrainian border, the most tolerant towards exceptions.

Hofstede's **Uncertainty Avoidance**, a concept close to Particularism/Universalism, is quite higher in the Czech Republic than in Slovakia. This dimension involves the extent to which ambiguous situations are threatening to individuals, the extent to which rules and order are preferred and the extent to which uncertainty is tolerated in a society. The Czechs are not fond of uncertainty and

much favour situations to be clear and not ambiguous. The lower uncertainty of Slovaks is displayed in their need to build relationships before engaging in further business. If they trust someone, they are willing to take the risks because in their understanding everything depends on “people”.

Some differences appear with the **Specific/Diffuse** dimension. A diffuse culture means the split between one’s public and private life is not really clear. In other words, you belong to the inner circle of your friends, and you ignore (at best) the individuals outside your life (Trompenaars 1993). Presented in a simple manner, diffuse cultures treat relationships in a very simple way: we are friends or total strangers to each other. In other words, Diffuse people are relationship orientated, sometimes called “Being”; while their alter ego, the Specific cultures are more Task orientated, otherwise called “Doing”.

Despite an observed proximity, it appears that Slovaks tend to display a more “being” orientation than the more “doing” orientated Czechs (TMC 2015). In order to start cooperation, the Slovaks need a “warmer exchange of ideas” in order to feel that the partners have become friends. Thus, to establish harmony in their relationships, they tend to adapt their communication style to their partner. Their Czechs are ranked much more Specific by Trompenaars (2016), with a score of 80/20 while the Slovaks 58/42. Therefore, a visitor may expect direct criticism or even sarcastic humour in Prague, a behaviour likely to offend their Slovak counterparts.

This attitude exists also internally, between superiors and employees. Therefore, **Indirect communication** is the standard in Slovakia, while the Czechs may be more direct, to the point. To sum up, good relations are important in both countries at work, in negotiations, and generally in every day’s life encounters. However, some extra “small talk” may be useful in Slovakia compared to the Czech Republic.

Trust as a cross-cultural dimension deals with the amount of trust existing naturally between individuals (Covey 2008). In other words, are we engaged in a relationship with trust (e.g. father and son), or without trust (e.g. a client and a banker). When trust exists, time and money are saved (a handshake will do). When there is no trust, time and bureaucracy take over (for example, security checks in airports). Rankings (WVS 2004) show that both surveyed cultures belong to the countries with little spontaneous trust. Indeed, one must have the right connections, or to have known someone for a long time to be ready to work with him. Religion plays a decisive role here, with individuals from countries of Catholic traditions tending to trust less each other’s than those living in countries of Protestant influence. Can worshipers be entrusted to interact directly with God, or should an intermediary (a priest, the Pope, etc.) be the guarantor of this trust?

While little regular practice is now conducted in Slovakia by a vast majority of the population, worshiping rankings (Gallup 2009) place the country much higher than the notorious atheist Czech Republic. The Czech Republic scores 3rd most atheistic country in the world (Gallup 2012) while a vast majority of the Slovak population recognizes itself as Catholic. This could lead to the conclusion the Czech are more trusting than the Slovaks but further evidence would be needed as the practice of religion is low in both countries.

Collectivism/Individualism. Who needs whom? Does the group needs the individual and therefore accepts its individuality, or the individual accepts to adapt to the group’s requirement in order to keep harmony. In the Trompenaars’ profiles of the two cultures, Slovakia scores only 56/44 at Individualism/Communitarianism, while the Czech Republic displays a much higher result with 90/10 (THT 2016). Hofstede also ranks both countries as individualistic but with a smaller gap between them: 58 for the Czech Republic and 52 for Slovakia (Hofstede 2016). Such results would indicate two cultures that tend to reward moderately individual initiative and achievement over consensus decision-making and a group work. However, the weight of history has to be taken into account here. Visitors to the countries capitals working in new industries are correct to expect an individualistic behaviour from their Czech and even Slovak hosts; however, the same visitors should expect more collectivistic attitudes in organizations with an old history, such as brown field factories or state bodies born in the Communist period. Another explanation from history can be found in Kolman et al. (1999), who reviewed that inheritance traditions are used to justify the difference of

industrial development. Because the Czechs used to have single heirs when the Slovaks shared inheritance between all children, the young Czechs used to go to the city to earn a living and this developed a stronger sense of individualism and also laid ground to modern industries. Today, the Czechs are not only more individualistic than the Slovak, they are also more relying on industry.

Hierarchy is also called Power Distance in cross-cultural management (Hofstede 1980). This is a simple concept to understand: some cultures enjoy hierarchical relationships among their members (at work, in the street, or at home), while others, more egalitarian, value equality. In this study, the authors observed both societies to be conservative as far as the roles of men and women are concerned. This hierarchical propensity explains also why displaying one's status is seen as a way to get one's way.

This is the biggest difference between the Czech and Slovak Republics according to the Hofstede study in power distance. But this is subject to disagreement. It is worth mentioning both the PDI and MAS indexes available on the site of Geert Hofstede are for Slovakia is 100 and only 57 for Czech Republic. In his edition of 2001, the ranking were 104 and 57. Were we to accept this data, the Czech should be moderately hierarchical (yet much higher than Germany, which is ranked at... 35, and even Japan which is moderately hierarchical with 54), the Slovaks should be aiming for the stars with stellar ranking, displaying the highest (together with Malaysia) PDI in the world! Anyone accustomed with both cultures knows such a massive gap is absolute non-sense.

However, regardless of Hofstede's score, it is clear that both countries are hierarchical. Top managers enjoy unquestioned power in organizations and the organizational culture of many companies is both hierarchical and relationship orientated, a combination called "Family" by Trompenaars (1993). This strong respect for hierarchy has the negative effect of having subordinates to pass off any responsibility to the next level of management, hence concentrating decision-making and power.

Another cultural dimension linked to hierarchy is how groups accord status. According to Trompenaars (1993), Achieved **status** cultures give importance to past results, achievements or recent successes. Contrariwise, Ascribed cultures believe status depends on the intrinsic characteristics of the person, such as seniority, gender or social connections. In this analysis, a first ascertainment is that the use of titles in correspondence is very important in both countries. However, this would be misleading to conclude that Czech and Slovaks Republics be Ascribed today. Indeed, if ascription was the norm in communist Czechoslovakia, when the countries opened up, many national and foreign companies promoted young people to management positions based on their studies abroad, language skills and their competitiveness. The older generation was viewed as less "experienced" managers because of their communist background. A new ambitious generation (sometimes dubbed "young sharks") has reached high positions in the hierarchical organizations and acquired strong status recognition.

According to Hofstede's **Masculinity index** (Hofstede 1980), the so-called "Feminine" societies have a preference for resolving conflicts by compromise and negotiation, while in masculine countries there is a feeling that conflicts should be resolved in an assertive way. We are here again confronted with a statistical problem as country rankings present Czech Republic as a feminine country (MAS index is 57) compared to Slovakia who appears as extremely Masculine, with a score of 100! (Hofstede's site 2016). Reasonably, those two countries cannot display such strong difference. However, other tools (TMC 2015) rank the degree of **cooperation vs. competition** in both countries quite different? While the Czechs appear slightly cooperative, the Slovaks are more assertive and competitive. So, while MAS index is to be disregarded, a difference exists between the two cultures as far as assertiveness is concerned, the Slovaks displaying a more competitive attitude than the Czechs (TMA 2015).

When analyzing displays of **emotions**, statistically, both cultures belong to the middle group of countries in terms of assertiveness. It means individuals are not particularly aggressive in their relationships. We are in the presence of two cultures that do not favour emotional arguments over reason. Facts and figures will be more effective in convincing a counterpart than emotions.

Shouting, weeping and the like are neither seen professional in the Czech Republic nor in the Slovak Republic.

Practice, however, sheds light on some slight variations. For instance, the difference regarding displays of emotions between the Czechs and the Slovaks is more visible among team members or in the relationships between a superior and an employee. The Slovaks match their good working relationships with emotional openness more than the Czechs. It means that good working relationships are based on sharing positive or negative emotions being outside the scene of an official meeting or negotiations.

For the even more neutral Czechs, the decision making process can be quite slow, where unhurried, methodical approach to analyse a project will be preferred over a sense of priority or the use of emotions.

External vs. Internal **locus of control** concerns how much individuals believe they control their own lives. While both countries feel quite externally controlled (like most countries in the world), which means they believe external forces have a significant influence on their lives (Rotter 1966), the religious aspect presented above would suggest the Slovaks to be even more externally controlled than the Czechs.

However, the impact of religion is probably greatly overshadowed by the influence of history, namely being governed by the Communist regime for many years. During this period characterised by a strong centralization of all aspects of life, individuals took the habit of having an external force (the Communist party) deciding for them. To many of them, this was nonsense to fight for a different way. All aspects of economic and social life were controlled and planned by leading Communist party members and people could rarely decide themselves elements closely connected with their lives. This regime ended only 25 years ago and obviously its influence is still deeply rooted in people's mind today.

Another aspect of this seemingly difference between the two cultures has to do with the ratio of the Slovaks and Czechs populating the late „Czechoslovakia“. The ratio has always been 2 to 1: The number of the Czech inhabitants was about 10 million while the Slovaks oscillated around 5 million. Having the seat of all governmental bodies in Prague (the capital of the Czech Republic) and being in majority, the Czech were naturally dominant in the country. On the other hand, the Slovaks had little chance to raise up their voice and consequently only agreed without any trial to change it. Many cultures require logical process and all details before reaching a conclusion. Representatives from those “**Deductive**” cultures are often at odds with colleagues from “**Inductive**” cultures who need just enough information to justify a decision (Foster 2000). In other words, should we first present a project from its conceptual, theoretical perspective, or by showcasing the desired results in the form of examples, models or a plan of implementation? Both cultures belong to moderately Deductive cultures (DFA 2014), meaning that theory, processes and details are essentials to convince a counterparts. This coincides with a Neutral attitude towards emotions.

4.2 Time-related cultural dimensions

Time is a major element of cross-cultural management. Among the topics of interest within this category, the Past/Present/Future orientation of both countries is most instructive for this cultural review (Kluckhohn 1961). Even if a gap exists among generations (older ones tend to be nostalgic of the past... everywhere!), both countries are usually considered “Present” oriented which means past events are of lesser importance than current aspects: Brand reputation, for instance, is likely to be more quality based than history-based.

That being said, Slovakia may actually be more “Present” orientated than the Czech Republic. Indeed Slovaks tend to have discontinued many traditions established during “Czechoslovakia” and even do not celebrate historical events, which the Czechs do. One of the examples is 28th October (when Czechoslovakia was established) which is not a public holiday in Slovakia, unlike in the Czech Republic.

The slight differences between the two countries may result from their recent historical and political development. After their “velvet divorce”, the Slovak Republic started to build its identity, values, symbols and institutions practically ex nihilo. While the Czech Republic preserved the flag and the anthem of former Czechoslovakia, the Slovak Republic came up with new national symbols. Also, the Czech Republic kept state organizations in the existing governmental buildings of the former Czechoslovakia while the Slovak Republic had to build a new parliamentary building. Thus, we could say that today’s Slovakia derives its identity and values from recent economic and political achievements while the Czechs are more easily anchored in the past.

Another element of Time is whether cultures are short or long term orientated. This statistic reflects the degree to which a community encourages and rewards future-oriented behaviours, such as planning and delaying gratification.

For instance, one could argue that buying versus renting residence could show some longer term orientation. Figures show a residential debt to disposable income of household ratio to be 24,9% for the Czech Republic and 31,2% for Slovakia (EMF 2012). Such finding could confirm Hofstede’s Long Term Orientation index of 77 for Slovakia and 71 for Czech Republic as far as the gap between the cultures is concerned. However, observations show two short-term orientated cultures, despite Hofstede scoring both countries as Long term orientated: The mortgage ratio mentioned is the lowest in Europe after Slovenia.

Time is also analysed as **Monochronic versus Polychronic cultures** (Hall 1973). While Monochronic cultures view time in a linear manner with clear segmentation of task, polychronics tend to have a holistic understanding of time, where effectiveness is favoured over efficiency. This also influences one’s punctuality, monochronic people being keen on being on time as a show of respect to their counterpart’s agenda. In this case, we may label cultures Fixed or Fluid towards their time orientation. For this analysis, both culture highly value punctuality and visitors counting on a Slavic influence are often surprised by the strictness the Czechs and Slovaks enforce timetables.

Based on the authors’ experience, both countries see the other one as less fixed than self. The Slovaks consider the Czechs to be more relaxed... and vice versa! For instance, Slovaks match the Czech perception of time with the Czech word “Pohoda” which is difficult to translate. Some dictionaries use the words “peace” or “contentment”. However, the Czech understanding implies not being in a hurry, not being disturbed by others and enjoying relaxed approach to life. Yet, the Czechs still consider themselves to be more punctual than their Slovak neighbours.

5 Results

The Figure 1 below shows a summary of the 14 cultural dimensions analysed in this research. This graphical representation clearly shows two cultures that share many characteristics. However several dimensions mark clear differences between those two countries:

- The specific/Diffuse dimension
- Individualism/ Collectivism
- Neutral and Emotional display of emotions
- Past/Present orientation

None of those cultural gaps are extreme, confirming the assumption those two countries share a definite cultural proximity.



Figure 1: Summary of cultural dimensions surveyed
Source: author

6 Limits and recommendations

The rare available statistics for both countries let the in situ observations take much influence in this analysis. The authors were confronted with the lack of analysis available in the GLOBE project (which covers 62 countries) but also from the World Value Survey. The model of Hofstede is available but unreliable. Not only the scores of both countries have been estimated by the researcher, hence lacking any statistical backing, but its result is very questionable for Slovakia. It is worth mentioning both the PDI and MAS indexes available on the site of Geert Hofstede are for Slovak Republic is 100 and only 57 for Czech Republic. If the two countries display some differences, such statistical gap is unrealistic. Besides the similarity of results adds to the bewildering. The authors relied on other sources such as the IAP of Trompenaars Hampden-Turner, which is probably the most reliable data accessible. The authors also used the TMC and TMA cross-cultural rankings but it is not possible to verify the academic solidity of those models even if the proposed answers are mostly in line with the authors' observations and analysis. Therefore, further research based on quantitative analysis of behaviours of representatives of each cultures is suggested to reach a higher degree of differentiation.

7 Conclusions

This cross-cultural study reveals that the Czech and Slovak cultures have much more in common than they have differences. The long joint history of those countries is the first reason for it, followed by geographical and linguistics proximity. However, anyone involved in a cross-cultural project between those two countries would be well advised to withhold a series of cultural gaps. Indeed, many cross-cultural negative experiences involved cultures often believed as "quite similar". The similarities being galore, one's tend to forget the remaining differences, till they are shockingly exposed to the individual.

A detailed analysis of 14 cultural dimensions, this research revealed key differences related to the dimensions of Particularism, Specific and Emotions display. The Czechs and the Slovaks themselves have identified those areas before by themselves. However, this study provides a useful academic confirmation to what could be seen as clichés. The Czechs view the Slovaks as more relationships oriented and point out their more evident display of emotions during professional or private events. Vice-versa, the Slovaks expect their Czech colleagues to be more rule-driven, task orientated and more neutral with their emotions.

While those differences are not considered an obstacle for doing business or working together, they need to be carefully taken into account when cooperating with Czech and Slovak cultures.

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M16, M31

Résumé

Česká a Slovenská republika: medzikultúrne porovnanie

Článok sa pokúsi porovnať kultúry v Českej a Slovenskej republike vo firemnom prostredí. Pre zostavenie zoznamu kultúrnych dimenzií získaných od renomovaných modelov autori použili systematické behaviorálne porovnania jednotlivých krajín. Práca autorov bola obmedzená dvoma faktormi. Prvým bola kultúrna blízkosť krajín za predpokladu mnohých drobných odlišností. Druhým bola analýza obmedzovaná nedostatkom dostupných medzi kultúrnych štatistík pre skúmané krajiny. Analýza ukázala, že obe krajiny majú veľmi úzky kultúrny zlom a zdieľajú mnoho kultúrnych zvláštností. Avšak bolo izolovaných niekoľko výrazných rozdielov: partikularizmus, špecifickosť a emočný prejav. Vzhľadom na nedostatok dostupných a spoľahlivých kvantitatívnych dát o českej a slovenskej kultúre je navrhnutý ďalší výskum, ako napríklad faktorová analýza za pomoci dotazníka.

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