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**HUNGARY, A BRIDGE BETWEEN
EAST AND WEST:
CULTURAL ASPECTS OF
JOINING THE NEW EUROPE**

While much attention has been devoted to the economic, commercial, financial and legal aspects of Hungary's joining the European Union, the cultural aspects of the issue have rather been neglected so far though it is important to realize the great influence cultural differences have on Western Europe's attitude to the EU's eastern extension and also on the Hungarian attitude to the country's accession.

In the first years of the 21st century, in the finishing run of the accession process it may be an interesting and also significant issue to investigate the main impacts on Hungarian culture throughout its history and how these are reflected in the cultural characteristics of today's Hungary.

Hungarian culture, due to the country's unique location in the heart of Central Europe, and due to historical factors, has always been at the crossroads between eastern and western cultures, has functioned as a bridge between East and West, in a way integrating characteristic features of both. Austrians, our "next door neighbours" at the western border, still call us "eastern European", eastern Europeans call us "westernized". This unique Hungarian integration of eastern and western cultural characteristics has its advantages, it makes the accession process easier and it helps the country to conform to western business cultural norms.

What is our culture like? To find the answer to the question we should point out that not only Hungarians raise issues of this kind nowadays. In the last decade cross- and intercultural communication studies have been in the forefront of international academic research as a part of the efforts made towards achieving

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a harmonised European Union and the globalisation of the world economy. Research in this field can provide very helpful guidelines for people as they interact in a fast-changing world marked by increasing intercultural contact.

Meeting this intercultural challenge is of the utmost importance in regions which increasingly face problems and conflicts of this type, e. g. East Central Europe, due to the political and economic changes in the region in the last thirteen years.

Hungary had for centuries been a sort of buffer state between east and west, a kind of bastion for Austria to protect or save western Europe e.g. from the Mongol or Tatar invasion in the 13th, the Turks in the 16th and 17th centuries, and from the Russians in the 20th century.

This country had been a battlefield for most of its history, where eastern and western cultures frequently clashed; as the great Hungarian poet and scholar, BABITS, puts it: "Greater powers stared at each other over our heads. ... Saviours and enemies switched roles, everything was ambiguous, everything was possible. We ourselves were almost impotent, mere observers of our own lives."¹ At the same time, as we have already pointed out, in a unique way Hungarian culture has also integrated characteristic features of both eastern and western cultures.

If we just take a walk in the Hungarian capital, we can see evidence to support this statement. Some central parts of Budapest look very much the same as Vienna, but you can also find some Turkish mosques and minarets, and Turkish baths, and not only in Budapest, but in other cities and towns of Hungary as well. In some cases even within one building you can identify western and eastern characteristics. E.g.: The interior of the gothic Matthias or Coronation Church in the Castle district, a much photographed beauty spot of Budapest, looks very oriental, which is not so surprising when we remember that this church was used by the Turks as their main mosque for one and a half centuries.

This eastern-western dual cultural influence is quite understandable, if we consider the just mentioned more than 150 years of Turkish occupation of the central part of the country in the 16th-17th centuries on the one hand, and on the other hand the more than 230 years of Austrian dominance following Ottoman rule. The western part of the country came under Habsburg control in the first part of the 16th century, when the country was divided into three parts, thus the western part of the country experienced nearly 400 years of Austrian domination, and in a much more subtle way of course, this influence can still be felt in the western region.

Hungary has always been receptive to the cultural influences coming from Western European countries. Let us mention a few examples of this typical tendency. Buda, the Hungarian capital was an early centre of Renaissance art, partly due to the fact that King MATTHIAS'S second wife, BEATRICE OF ARAGON from the late 15th century strove to transform Hungarian practices and to bring them in line with Italian ideas, and King MATTHIAS enthusiastically supported her endeavours.²

¹ Quoted in: Falk-Bánó - Polyák: 208.

² Hanák, 1988.

Another important impact on Hungarian culture was the 18th century French Enlightenment. From the end of the 18th century, under the influence of these progressive ideas “within a few decades, Hungarian society had been transformed and backwardness in culture, attitude to life and thinking was, to some extent, remedied.”¹

A third, current example is how under the influence of Western European, and U. S. business practices Hungarian business culture is conforming to western business cultural norms. “An important benefit is the impact foreign investors have had on Hungary’s human resources and corporate culture. »Five years ago, if I asked one of my staff to order supplies, he would have forgotten to check prices« says PETER KRAFT, head of American Express in Budapest. »Now he’s telling me where I can cut costs.«²

This tendency, i.e. Hungarians’ readiness to learn new methods, is also mentioned in “Doing Business in Hungary”, a publication of the Confederation of British Industry, published in 1991, where different western managers, who have had experience with Hungarians, tell their opinion about Hungarians. E.g.: PIERS BROGAN of Travers Morgan Kft., i.e. Ltd., offers the following advice to British companies setting up in Hungary: “Don’t underestimate the Hungarian people. Culturally, they are more formal than we are both socially and in business... I have found them to be fast learners, with a good sense of humour and a lot of enterprise.”³

FLEMMING HOST’s experiences in Hungary, in 3M Hungaria KPV company, lead him to say the following: “Remember that good personal relationships are essential to doing business in Hungary: they are what enabled the country to survive the dead hand of central planning. ...Don’t underestimate the Hungarians, they are well educated and hard working. They are also renowned for their innovations. It was Hungarians who invented the biro and the filament for the electric light bulb.”⁴

It is interesting to see how often they emphasize the importance of not underestimating Hungarians. This definitely suggests the tendency of western managers’ doing so prior to their experiences with Hungarians.

A very important piece of advice from HERBERT KEMPE of Ford Hungária Kft., summarizing FORD’s experience in Hungary: “Be aware of and respect the different culture in Hungary: imposing Western methods in an authoritarian fashion will not produce good results.”⁵

Speaking about Hungary’s receptivity to western cultural influences, by contrast, we can say that though perhaps the impact on organisational culture was considerable, the more than 40 years of eastern, namely Russian domination, between 1945 and 1989, did not have such a remarkable impact on Hungarian culture in general. The cause of this may be the historically speaking short time

¹ Ibid: 87.

² Business Central Europe, December 1995/January 1996, quoted in: Falk-Bánó, 1997:120.

³ CBI, 1991: 285.

⁴ Ibid: 276.

⁵ Ibid: 293.

period on the one hand, and on the other hand the considerable active – the 1956 revolution –, and also the passive resistance of the Hungarian population.

In terms of linguistic influence we can also state that Hungarian culture integrates eastern and western influences. In present-day colloquial Hungarian we can find numerous examples of both German and Turkish vocabulary. E. g.: the words “suszter” (shoemaker), “snassz” (mean – speaking of a person, shabby – meant for clothes), “smucig” (stingy, niggardly), “snájdig” (dashing, smart), “smink” (make-up), just to mention a few, come from German. Words like “alma” (apple), “zseb” (pocket), “szakáll”(beard), “búza” (wheat), “árpa” (barley), and several other words are of Turkish origin.¹ It is quite obvious that the words which come from Turkish belong much more to basic vocabulary than those of German origin. This can be explained by the fact that the Hungarian language borrowed from Turkish not only during the period of Turkish rule, but also 800-900 years earlier, when the Hungarian, or Magyar tribes had contact with the Turks in Central Asia prior to their great migration towards west, to present-day Central Europe.

Speaking of eastern linguistic influence we should also mention the numerous words of Slav origin in Hungarian, e. g.: “galamb” (dove), “udvar” (court yard), “csoroszlya” (coultter), “borona” (harrow), “német” (German). These words also represent basic Hungarian vocabulary and were borrowed from the Slavs who had lived in the Carpathian Basin prior to its conquest by Hungarians in the 9th century.

Here we come to a very important fact and a key to understanding Hungarian integration of eastern and western characteristics. Originally the ancestors of the Magyars came from the Central Asian region, and after a number of military campaigns, plundering and fighting with bows and arrows, much to the horror of western Europe, the swift Magyar riders were eventually defeated and had to give up their way of life. It was King ISTVÁN I., later canonized as ST. STEPHEN, who swore obedience to the Pope and was crowned in the year 1000, who converted Hungarians to Western Christianity, and who effected the organization of the Hungarian state, partly based on Western European and Slavic examples.²

It was during this period, that Hungarian culture, which had originally come from the east, began to conform to the then and for centuries later more developed western cultural norms, and in one way or another this process has been going on ever since.

RICHMOND, in his book, entitled “From Da to Yes, Understanding the East Europeans”, comments on this subject as follows:

“Despite their Asian origins, the Magyars have identified with Europe for a thousand years. Today’s Hungarian, living in the heart of the continent, is actually an ethnic mix of Huns and Avars, Magyars, Slavs, Tatars, Turks, Roumanians, Germans, Jews, Gypsies, and other ethnic groups that marauded or migrated over centuries to the Central Danubian Basin” ... superimposed and deposited as CLAUDIO MAGRIS describes them “one upon another in layer after layer.”³ Moreover, the Hungarians lived on a broad plain, “bound together by

¹ Magyar Értelmező Szótár - Hungarian Explanatory Dictionary, 1985.

² Hanák, 1988.

³ Richmond quoting Magris, C., Danube, trans. Patrick Creagh, New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1989.

their Magyar language, a culture and lifestyle that are uniquely Hungarian, a passionate pride in their Hungarianness, and an attachment to their homeland.”¹

This passionate pride is mentioned by other authors as well, though from a different aspect.

BRANFMAN, in an article entitled “In Search of the Hungarian Soul” quotes Hungarian psychologist MARGOT HONTI as saying that understanding Hungarian self-esteem is a key for westerners working with Hungarians.

“Hungarians have lost self-esteem on the outside, but this nation is very very proud in its depths. This seed of pride is impossible to break. It’s very important for foreigners dealing with Hungarians to understand this. If they believe that Hungarians have a low self-esteem as they tend to show on the outside, and deal with them as if they are inferiors, they will lose their connection with them. It’s paradoxical, but the lower the self-esteem in everyday life, the higher it is in a person’s inner life.”

MARGOT HONTI links Hungarians’ withdrawal to centuries of foreign occupation. “To understand Hungary – she says –, one must think of a woman who has been abused for a long time by different soldiers.”²

Another, renowned, Hungarian psychologist DR. BUDA also connects depression with foreign domination. He is quoted in the article as follows:

“Hungarian society has a tradition that outward aggression has always been controlled by social forces. People have always lived in a depressed state because they have always been occupied, and there has been strict control.”³

BRANFMAN also quotes LÁSZLÓ HONTI, another expert on the subject, who emphasizes as well that the years of foreign aggression had a paradoxical effect. A lack of outward aggressiveness or assertiveness is coupled with a deep inner sense of pride and national identity.

“People here seem to have more pride or individuality than in the west. Adults don’t show it, though you can see it in how young people, especially young men, tend to hold themselves – like a cock in the farmyard. We have pride and awareness of national identity that is deeply rooted in the Hungarian character. Many people have low external self-esteem putting themselves down and complaining. But inside they are proud and feel good about themselves.”⁴

BRANFMAN points out that it is just the other way round in America. “People there pretend they’re okay, like with those »keep smiling« buttons. There are no »keep smiling« buttons in Hungary”.⁵

BRANFMAN is right. In my research, during the interviews with British, American, Dutch and also Japanese expatriates, one of the most common complaints was that Hungarians are not customer orientated enough. An American manager said the following:

“When you just go to a supermarket, they make you feel as though they were doing you a favour. They’re not doing you a favour ... they should be very grateful

¹ Richmond, Y., 1995:108.

² Branfman in: English for a Changing Hungary, eds. Goodfriend and Miskolczy, 1996:27.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

that you're going to that supermarket, you could go to another supermarket. If you behave like that in the States, you'll be out of business."¹

In connection with customer orientated attitudes, it is interesting to mention that in HILL's "Euromanagers and Martians" you can find similar complaints about the French. The following comment could well be on Hungarians:

"An American businessman running his hi-tech company's French sales subsidiary commented to the International Herald Tribune that, despite »drilling, drilling, drilling, his employees still forget that they should not argue with customers, that they should try to be of service, and that they should make a point of returning phonecalls.«² A Danish marketing VP confirms the problem: "I have great difficulty getting my French salespeople to look at things from the customer's point of view. If they get into an argument with him out of conviction that their vision of things is the right one, then the customer's wrong period."³

This goes to support what I always emphasize that from a cultural point of view there is a great deal in common between the French and the Hungarians. This seems to be other people's opinion as well. HILL in "We Europeans" quotes a Hungarian author, GEORG KÓVÁRY, as saying that summing up all the Hungarian characteristics, they come closest to the Italians or the French.⁴

Psychologist HONTI talks about a kind of outer "plastic" character that people have developed in Hungary for historical reasons. As he puts it:

"Some bowed to the Nazis, others to the Russians, and others to the Turks or the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The plasticity grew out of the need to survive. This is the main reason why they kept their internal pride hidden. They felt they had to show that they were inferior to their conquerors in order to survive."⁵

As regards this outer "plastic" character that people developed to survive, the western expatriates I have interviewed very often mentioned that Hungarians are clever at always finding the loopholes to avoid doing something they do not want to do. This kind of survival tactics is reflected in the saying about Hungarians: "A Hungarian entering a revolving door behind you will come out in front of you."

In BBC World Service Central Europe correspondent MISHA GLENNY's book "The Rebirth of History, Eastern Europe in the Age of Democracy", the author sums up the Western European opinion of the situation in Hungary in 1990, one year after the great political and economic changes, as follows:

"No country can claim to be more Central European than Hungary. Physically it is right in the middle of Europe, while culturally it is a bridge between Russia and the East on the one hand and the West on the other. It also marks the divide between the historically powerful countries of north-eastern Europe and the unstable Balkan nations in the south. It can easily claim to belong to any of these political and geographical areas and, for different reasons, is drawn to all of them. Now freed from the Soviet imperative,

¹ Falk-Bánó, 1997: 114.

² Hill, 1994: 214-215.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Hill, 1997: 265.

⁵ Branfman in: Goodfriend and Miskolczy eds. 1996:27.

Hungary stands in the middle of these diverse cultures, stroking its chin and pondering which way to turn.”¹

As far as the last part of the quotation is concerned, I do not think that there has ever been any hesitation in Hungary about the direction to take. This seems to be supported by other western opinions. E. g. RICHMOND points out:

“When King ISTVÁN (STEPHEN) received his crown from the pope in the year 1000, the Hungarian nation began the process of becoming Christian and henceforth a part of the Western world.”² He also says about Hungarians the following:

“They are smart, sophisticated, and very European, and they do not appreciate being talked down to.”³

As regards our cultural characteristics, RICHMOND also says:

“Hungarians seem to have a talent for absorbing themselves into other cultures and then becoming the prototypes of those cultures.”⁴ This is very true, I think, the Hungarian turning Nazi was worse than the original ones, the Hungarian turning communist became more communist than the Russian ones, and nowadays perhaps this explains why young Hungarians are so good disciples of Western managers, becoming much more individualistic with a much shorter term orientation than their original Hungarian cultural heritage would suggest. This seems to be connected with another typical trait “Hungarians ...do things with exaggeration...”⁵ that is why they “... are suicidal perfectionists-they must come out ahead even if they self-destruct in the process.”⁶ Also this may be the reason why, as he puts “Hungarians have a well-deserved reputation for being high achievers.”⁷

He mentions quite a few negative traits in the Hungarian character. He calls Hungarians “A nation of gripers”, Hungarians “... have the ability to turn positives into negatives and appear to delight in doing so. The Hungarian will complain if his ice cream is cold.”⁸ I think this is a witty way of characterising a still very typical example of the shortcomings of the Hungarian character. “Pessimism runs deep”, he says and then quotes a typical Hungarian reply to the question how things are going today: “Worse than yesterday, but better than tomorrow.”⁹

It may be useful to make an attempt at exploring how Hungarian (business) cultural characteristics affect communication in international organizations based in Hungary. We can do this on the basis of an eight-year research and fieldwork period, including interviews conducted with more than 350 American, British and Hungarian, recently also some Dutch, German and Japanese, managers and employees in these organizations.

If we try to identify Hungarian cultural characteristics on HOFSTEDE’s, TROMPENAARS’ and HALL’s cultural dimensions and concepts and what impact it has on present day Hungarian business cultural attitudes, we can state the following:

Hungarian culture in general and Hungarian business culture in particular can be characterised by a larger power distance than British and American cultures.¹⁰ This hypothesis is supported by interviews with several western managers and the following quotation from RICHMOND. “Social status remains important. Children

¹ Glenny, 1993:94.

⁴ Ibid:113.

⁷ Ibid:112.

¹⁰ Falk-Bánó, K., 1997.

² Richmond, 1995:115.

³ Ibid:112.

⁵ Ibid:109.

⁶ Ibid:113.

⁸ Ibid:114.

⁹ Ibid:115.

are raised to respect age, authority, and power.”¹ He also emphasizes that “Emotion rather than rational analysis often determines behavior.”² My British and American respondents have often complained of the emotional attitudes of Hungarians as well. This is partly due to the partly collectivist values and also to the polychronic, emotional, particularist and diffuse features of Hungarian culture.

Another characteristic in the Hungarian character and behaviour is what I would call “selective politeness”. Several western managers have mentioned to me how much it surprised them that Hungarians, who are so friendly and nice with their business partners, friends and acquaintances, can be so impolite, even rude in some cases to strangers in the street. This is what Richmond says commenting on this phenomenon. “At the office or at home Hungarians are most cordial, but on the street they can be quite uncivil to each other.”³ Unfortunately, I cannot more agree with him. If we want to find the reason though why people behave like this in Hungary, I think it might be related to the higher context and more collectivist attitudes of Hungarian culture compared to British and American low context and individualistic traits. People in your home or in the office are insiders, they are part of the social network you belong to, but those on the street are outsiders, and you have nothing to do with them. I have heard about similar attitudes in Japan, where people can be characterised by an even higher context and a much stronger collectivist culture than Hungarians. The extremely polite Japanese business executive says good-bye to you and then on his way home gets on the packed underground, literally kicking his way through the crowd.⁴

A recent Western European opinion of Hungarians is expressed by RICHARD HILL in “We Europeans”. In his opinion “The Hungarians are a delightful people, every bit as hardworking, intelligent, astute as any other race. They are also particularly responsive, subjective, empathetic, proud (in the words of a Scots businessman »too proud to listen«), ultimately emotional and occasionally hysterical.”⁵ I think it is an excellent summing up of Hungarian characteristics, also true about the French for example.

It may also be worthwhile to examine the attitude of Hungarians to membership of the European Union. An interesting interview with sociologist ISTVÁN HEGEDŰS, adviser to the Central European University of Budapest on foreign affairs, was published on the subject in a 1997 issue of “168 óra” (168 hours), a well-known Hungarian weekly. It seems to be still a valid evaluation. In the interview among other things he said:

“In Hungary most people (at present, in 2002, more than 75 per cent of the population) support the idea of EU membership though not for ideological but very pragmatic reasons: they think our membership of the European Union would bring us closer to the Western welfare states and it would also help individuals to improve their economic situation. ... But the ideological and historical background, i. e. that after centuries of fighting the peoples of Europe will succeed

¹ Richmond:111.

² Ibid:111.

³ Ibid:111.

⁴ Hidasi, 1998.

⁵ Hill, 1997: 266.

in creating a common Europe in which national identity and the European concept go hand in hand with each other is not taken seriously in Hungary. ... This is perhaps because we have accumulated so many bad experiences in our history. We have the fears and inferiority complex of a small country: even if we get into great Europe, our opinion will be neglected. ... Hungarian public opinion, several analysts and the media all approach Europe with reservations.” He speaks about Hungarian Europessimism which is not to be confused with British Euroscepticism indicating opposition to a federalist way of thinking, i.e. that Europe should be “more intergovernmental than supranational”. He thinks “our pessimism is a sort of general fear of and aversion to the future.”¹ This shows cultural characteristics, like the strong uncertainty avoidance in Hungary, which is also valid for the French and the Germans with the federalist approach, and the more open weak uncertainty avoidance cultural attitude of the British, but also it shows a factor still valid today, that Hungarians do not receive sufficient information about the advantages and the disadvantages of joining the European Union.

It is also an important and relevant issue to examine the other side, the Eurocitizen’s attitude towards the EU’s eastern extension. According to a 2000 survey of Eurobarometer only 47 per cent of the EU population support Hungary’s accession and out of ten people only three think that the eastern extension should be a priority issue. These figures do not show a very positive attitude towards the accession process but if we consider that only Malta has a better result with 49 per cent, our figure is not too bad at all.

It may be again connected to cultural characteristics that the French, characterised by strong uncertainty avoidance, support our joining the EU the least, 36 per cent of the population, but 65 per cent of the Danes and the Swedes, characterised by weak uncertainty avoidance, i.e. they are much more open to change, support Hungary’s EU membership.²

By comparison, according to the latest figures of a September Eurobarometer survey show that at present the situation is slightly worse, e.g. fewer than one in four Britons say they support expansion of the EU, although there is more outright hostility to the project in three other countries including France, where nearly half the population says it is opposed. The latest findings of the survey illustrate “how much the political elite needs to do to convince a sceptical public to support admission of the mainly ex-Communist countries in just over a year. Danes and Greeks are most likely to be in favour of admitting the 10 nations.” (After Irish referendum victory, poll shows only half of Europeans support enlargement.)³

The same survey indicates that only one in five EU citizens think that all the candidates should be allowed to join, and only 27% feel that enlargement should be a priority for the EU. Only Malta (51%), Cyprus (48%), Hungary (46%) and Poland (45%) obtained positive votes. All the other candidate countries obtained more negative votes. In Germany, support for enlargement is shrinking, with only 43% in favour – less than the 47% in December 2001. “The approaching accession

¹ Falk-Bánó, K., - Polyák, I., 1997:210.

² Hungarian daily “Népszabadság”, 2000, April 20, in: Falk-Bánó, K., 2000:31.

³ The Independent, October 22, 2002.

dates and the increasing media coverage seem to push the negative aspects of enlargement into the foreground, concludes the survey.”¹

We can still be satisfied with the results, Hungary obtains positive votes even at present though by now Cyprus is also ahead of Hungary. Of course a great part of the increasing negative attitudes are caused by ignorance and the insufficient information the EU citizen has about the candidate countries. There is indeed a lot to be done to convince the sceptical Eurocitizens to support the candidate countries. A very important aspect of this activity should be understanding the cultural diversity in the European Union. The importance of the cultural issues is reflected in what JEAN MONNET, the founder of the European Community once declared: “If I were again facing the challenge to integrate Europe, I would probably start with culture.”²

In conclusion, here is a comment that everybody should think about, made by MAC BOLTON, assistant director of the Roffey Park Management Institute in the U. K., quoted in *Euromanagers and Martians*: “There is a pattern of expectations of what people are like. If someone does not match up to these expectations, people get a bit puzzled. The trick is to retain some of the characteristics that people expect, while being very open to people who are different and respecting their differences.”³

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¹ Enlargement: EU attitudes range from indifference to antipathy. European Report, October 23, 2002.

² Trompenaars, 1993:8.

³ Hill, 1994:217.

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