



CULTURAL DIMENSIONS IN SALES AND SUPPORT: SERBIA VS. SWITZERLAND COMPARISON

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Abstract:

This paper explores the impact of national culture on business operations in sales and customer support in Serbia and Switzerland, using Hofstede's model of cultural dimensions. A theoretical comparison through six dimensions is supported by a qualitative interview with a Serbian manager collaborating with Swiss firms. Market research shows that a Swiss company with a Serbian-based support team was rated best in customer service—suggesting Serbia's competitive edge. This highlights how cultural values manifest in practice and provides recommendations for business in multicultural environments.

Keywords:

national culture, Hofstede, Serbia, Switzerland, customer support.

1. INTRODUCTION

In today's business environment, understanding cultural differences is essential for successful collaboration among teams and organizations. National culture influences communication, decision-making, and leadership, particularly in sectors with frequent customer interaction, such as service industries. Recent research shows that the ownership structure of companies and the socio-economic context significantly influence the perception of national culture, which further extends Hofstede's model (Radovanović *et al.*, 2022).

The aim of this paper is to conduct a comparative analysis of business practices in Serbia and Switzerland using the cultural dimensions model developed by Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov (2010). The model encompasses six dimensions: power distance, individualism vs. collectivism, masculinity vs. femininity, uncertainty avoidance, long-term vs. short-term orientation, and indulgence vs. restraint. The focus of the research is on the practical implications of these dimensions in an organizational context.

In addition to the theoretical analysis, the paper includes a case study based on an interview with a Serbian manager who collaborates with Swiss teams. This approach enables a deeper understanding of cultural differences in real-life business practice.

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2. METHODOLOGY

This research is theoretical in nature and is based on secondary analysis of data from Hofstede's studies and literature that applies his model in the context of Serbia and Switzerland. Initially, Yugoslavia was classified as part of the Eastern European cultural cluster (Hofstede, 2001), but in later editions, the authors emphasized that the former republics should be analyzed separately, as significant cultural differences emerged over time (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010). Nevertheless, due to their shared historical and geographical heritage, certain cultural patterns still show similarities, as evidenced by the separate indices for Slovenia, Croatia, and Serbia (Hofstede, 2001; Janićijević, 2003). This paper relies on the most updated values for Serbia and Switzerland.

Additional sources used include works that apply Hofstede's model—such as those by Perčević *et al.* (2018), Janićijević (2003), Radojević *et al.* (2019, 2024), among others—but only as analytical supplements. The theoretical framework is grounded primarily in Hofstede's original sources.

A supplementary qualitative method is an interview with a Serbian manager who has years of experience working with Swiss teams. This case study illustrates how theoretical cultural dimensions manifest in everyday business practice.

By combining theoretical comparison with a case study, the paper offers a deeper understanding of organizational differences and challenges in business operations between Serbian and Swiss companies.

3. THE ROLE OF NATIONAL CULTURE IN THE BUSINESS CONTEXT

National culture represents a system of collective values, norms, and beliefs that shapes individuals' thinking, emotions, and behavior. "Culture is the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group from another," with values being formed early in life and transmitted through family, education, and religion—leaving a lasting impact even in the workplace (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010).

Culture directly influences thinking, attitude formation, and interpersonal relations (Bulutlar & Oz, 2009; Glazer & Beehr, 2005; Hofstede, 2001; Josipović, 2016; Yousef, 2002; Perčević *et al.*, 2018). Within organizations, it shapes expectations regarding authority, communication, motivation, and conflict resolution. Managerial practices are more effective when aligned with the values of the dominant national culture (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010; Genkova *et al.*, 2022). Studies have shown that cultural dimension measures do not work equally well in Eastern Europe and that intercultural competences and acculturation strategies are shaped differently compared to Western countries (Genkova *et al.*, 2022).

In sales and customer support sectors, employees must align their behavior not only with their own cultural code but also with customer expectations. In one culture, warm and personal service may be seen as a virtue, while in another it may appear unprofessional—hence cultural sensitivity is crucial (Đurić & Đurić, 2009).

Using Hofstede's model, Radojević *et al.* (2024) show that collectivist and feminine cultures, like Serbia's, value emotional engagement, while individualist and masculine cultures prioritize efficiency and neutrality. Serbia's organizational culture is marked by high power distance, collectivism, and strong uncertainty avoidance (Janićijević, 2003), which, despite posing modernization challenges, can support culturally adapted management strategies.

When properly understood, national culture can become a framework for developing sustainable and effective business models.

4. THE MODEL OF CULTURAL DIMENSIONS

Geert Hofstede developed a model for comparing national cultures based on data from 116,000 IBM employees in 72 countries. The framework, later expanded to six key dimensions, quantifies cultural differences at the societal level rather than individual behavior. It remains widely used in international management and organizational communication (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010; Scheffknecht, 2011; Radovanović *et al.*, 2022). Each dimension is represented by an index from 1 to 100, enabling cross-country comparisons:

- **Power Distance (PDI):** Indicates the extent to which less powerful members of society accept unequal power distribution. High PDI cultures maintain strong hierarchies and authority, while low PDI cultures favor equality and open communication between superiors and subordinates.

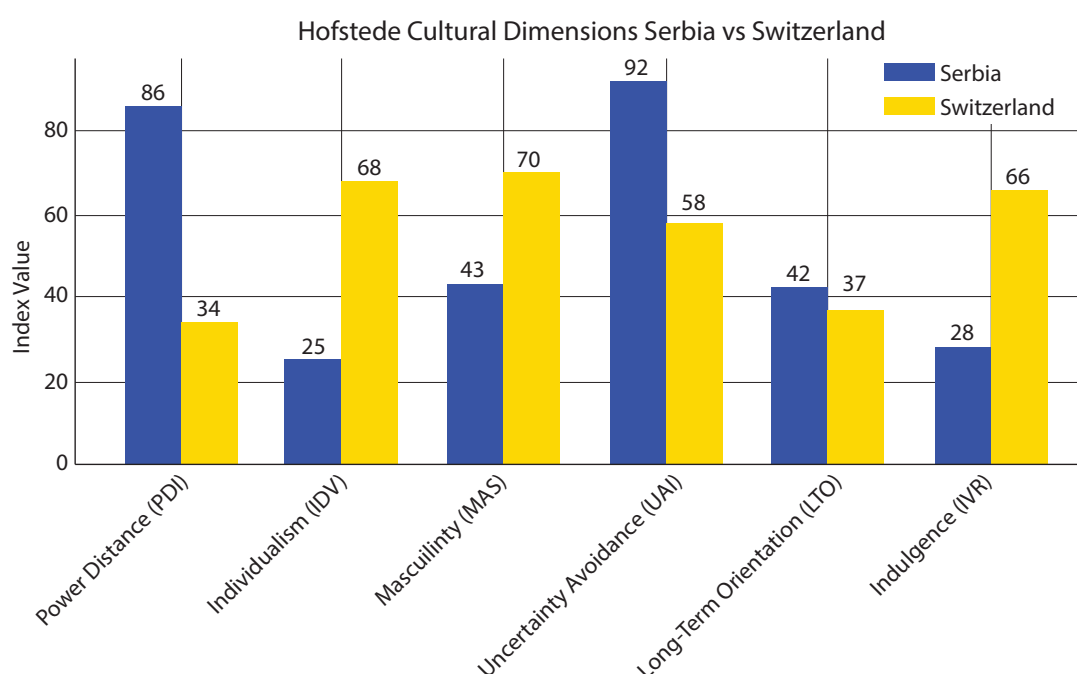


- Individualism vs. Collectivism (IDV): Individualistic societies emphasize autonomy, personal goals, and responsibility. In contrast, collectivist cultures prioritize group loyalty, consensus, and harmony in interpersonal relationships.
- Masculinity vs. Femininity (MAS): Masculine cultures value competition, achievement, and success. Feminine cultures emphasize care, empathy, and work-life balance.
- Uncertainty Avoidance (UAI): Reflects tolerance for ambiguity. High UAI cultures prefer clear rules and stability; low UAI cultures are more flexible and open to risk.
- Long-Term vs. Short-Term Orientation (LTO): Long-term cultures value perseverance, planning, and thrift. Short-term cultures focus on tradition, fulfilling immediate obligations, and quick results.
- Indulgence vs. Restraint (IVR): Describes how freely societies allow gratification. Indulgent cultures encourage enjoyment and expression, while restrained cultures emphasize self-control and adherence to social norms.

This model serves as a key tool for understanding how cultural patterns influence behavior in organizations and societies, especially in international business (Scheffknecht, 2011; Zakić & Milutinović, 2013; Robbins & Judge, 2023).

5. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF NATIONAL CULTURES: SERBIA AND SWITZERLAND

Figure 1. Hofstede Cultural Dimensions Comparison: Serbia vs Switzerland



Source: <https://www.theculturefactor.com>

Hofstede's six-dimensional model of national cultures enables a deeper understanding of cultural differences between nations and their application in a business context. A comparative analysis of the cultural dimensions of Serbia and Switzerland is presented in Figure 1.

Serbia has a very high Power Distance Index (PDI = 86), which indicates a strong acceptance of hierarchy and authority, as well as centralized decision-making. In such cultures, employees expect clear instructions from above and rarely question the authority of superiors (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010; Radovanović *et al.*, 2022). This pattern is also confirmed by Janićijević's research, which describes Serbian organizations as "pyramids with a benevolent autocrat at the top" (Janićijević, 2003). Moreover, cultures with a high power distance may exhibit a greater tendency toward corruption (Getz & Volkema, 2001; Hofstede, 2001; Inglehart, 2000; Perčević *et al.*, 2018). Switzerland, on the other hand, has a low power distance index (PDI = 34), indicating more egalitarian relationships between employees and management. Communication is more transparent, and superiors are perceived more as consultants than as authoritative figures (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010). Perčević *et al.* (2018) also emphasize that Swiss respondents expect equal exchange of opinions and shared responsibility within the team.



When it comes to individualism, however, Switzerland is an individualistic culture with a high index ($IDV = 68$), where personal initiative, privacy, and professional autonomy are highly valued. Individuals are perceived as independent, and success is measured by personal achievements (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010). In Switzerland, personal responsibility, life planning, and autonomy are especially appreciated (Perčević *et al.*, 2018). Serbia has a low individualism index ($IDV = 25$), which is characteristic of collectivist cultures, where the individual is identified as part of a wider group, and loyalty to the group takes precedence over personal goals (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010; Genkova *et al.*, 2022). Milovanović and Miroslavljević (2012) also point out that in Serbia, family, friendship, and informal networks are key to decision-making. In collectivist societies, people expect support and care from the community, to which they show high loyalty in return. In contrast, individualistic cultures promote personal responsibility and independence, and the social structure is more loosely defined, meaning that individuals bear the consequences of their decisions on their own (Janićijević, 2003).

Switzerland has a high masculinity index ($MAS = 70$), indicating a focus on achievement, efficiency, and competition. Success is measured by results, and expectations are professional and direct (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010). However, according to Perčević (2018), Swiss culture combines professionalism with respect for private life, indicating the presence of feminine elements as well. Serbia ($MAS = 43$) is among cultures where values associated with "femininity" are dominant—interpersonal relationships, care for others, and emotional balance are more appreciated (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010). In Serbian service sectors, public criticism is avoided, and a personalized approach to customers is preferred (Radojević *et al.*, 2024). Janićijević (2003) also notes that in masculine cultures, competition and material success are highly valued, while in feminine cultures, harmonious relationships and community well-being take precedence.

Serbia's extremely high Uncertainty Avoidance Index ($UAI = 92$) reflects a strong need for rules, security, and stability, with changes often perceived as threats and unpredictable situations causing stress (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010). As a result, Serbian organizations frequently rely on bureaucracy and formal rules as a mechanism of control (Janićijević, 2003; Genkova *et al.*, 2022). In contrast, Switzerland has a medium UAI (58), but research shows a high degree of structure, planning, and clear regulations in practice, especially in tourism and service sectors (Perčević *et al.*, 2018). This apparent contradiction can be explained by the fact that in individualistic societies like Switzerland, strong institutions compensate for the role of family and personal networks, enabling individuals to function independently. Therefore, clarity and organization in business do not arise solely from uncertainty avoidance, but from a cultural mechanism that supports personal autonomy within a highly developed institutional system.

Switzerland shows a moderate long-term orientation ($LTO = 37$). In practice, this is reflected in a strong emphasis on planning, investment in education, frugality, and continuity (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010). Perčević *et al.* (2018) and Espig *et al.*, (2022) further confirm that Swiss respondents are strongly focused on achieving future goals and maintaining stability. Serbia, on the other hand, with an LTO index of 42, displays a somewhat stronger short-term orientation compared to Switzerland—focusing on preserving tradition, fulfilling immediate goals, and a "live for today" mentality (Milovanović, 2012).

Switzerland, with a high indulgence index ($IVR = 66$), is classified among societies that encourage personal freedoms and leisure as important aspects of quality of life. In such environments, individuals more easily fulfill their desires, invest in recreational activities, and strive to maintain a work-life balance. Research by Perčević (2018) supports this view, with respondents highlighting the importance of leisure time for personal well-being, a finding further reinforced by Lamberti *et al.* (2025). Serbia, by contrast, has a low indulgence index ($IVR = 28$), representing a restrained culture in which self-control, a sense of duty, and limited expression of personal desires are present in everyday life. In such a social context, priority is given to collective norms and obligations, while individual enjoyment is often seen as less acceptable. This contrast clearly shows how Switzerland promotes hedonistic values and a balance between work and private life, while Serbia tends toward stricter behavioral control and greater respect for social norms (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010). Research by Radojević, Stanišić, and Stanić (2019) shows that employees from restrained cultures often achieve better results in service quality due to higher levels of professionalism, discipline, and responsibility. This analysis, based on Hofstede's model, systematically highlights cultural differences between Serbia and Switzerland. Secondary sources further validate and refine these distinctions, essential for the paper's later analysis.



6. CASE STUDY

To complement the theoretical discussion with empirical insight, the following section presents an interview with T.J., a project manager from Serbia who has been working for years with Swiss colleagues. Her experience in direct communication and operational collaboration offers valuable perspectives on the practical effects of cultural differences in the customer support and sales sectors.

6.1. TEAM COMMUNICATION AND DECISION-MAKING

During her collaboration with Swiss teams, significant differences were noted in the ways teams communicate and make decisions. "Each person on their team has a clearly defined task, focused on individual contribution and personal responsibility. In Serbia, even when the task is done independently, people seek confirmation from the team, second opinions, and advice."

This reflects the fundamental contrast between the individualist orientation of Swiss culture and the collectivist approach that dominates the Serbian business environment (IDV). In individualist societies, people are expected to take care of themselves and their immediate family, while in collectivist cultures, individuals grow up within strong, loyal groups that provide protection in exchange for loyalty (Hofstede, 2001; Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010). In practice, Swiss employees demonstrate greater autonomy, while Serbian teams tend to seek collective decisions and group validation. Collectivism is also seen in the emotional support among colleagues, while individualist teams place more emphasis on professional distance.

This contrast also reflects differences in the masculinity dimension. Switzerland, though relatively balanced, leans toward masculine values, emphasizing achievement, results, public recognition, and critique. Transparency and open evaluation of employee performance are the norm, as professional growth is believed to come through direct and measurable feedback—even at the cost of personal discomfort (Palombi *et al.*, 2023).

On the other hand, Serbia, as a feminine culture, emphasizes interpersonal harmony, empathy, and avoiding confrontation. Feedback is given discreetly, in private conversations, so as not to disrupt team relationships or emotional well-being. In this context, public praise or criticism may be seen as inappropriate or even demotivating.

6.2. DIFFERENCES IN TRAINING AND ONBOARDING

In Serbia, onboarding is gradual, progressing through three phases—learning and adjustment (3 months), reflection with testing, and eventual independence. Access to digital culture fosters greater openness, which is particularly relevant for international sales and support (Lamberti *et al.*, 2025). "In Serbia, after each phase we conduct a test and provide verbal, face-to-face feedback. The Swiss don't do that. They learn through practice—learning by doing—and work at the computer from day one, just like everyone else." This difference reflects Serbia's high Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI), where employees feel secure with structured training, testing, and immediate feedback. Switzerland, while also organized, fosters trust in individual capabilities, promoting experiential learning and initiative without fear of failure. Its training culture reflects lower anxiety toward uncertainty and elements of indulgence, encouraging personal growth and learning without fear (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010; Lamberti *et al.*, 2025).

6.3. TRANSPARENCY AND LEADERSHIP STYLE

In Swiss sales teams, meetings are completely open—managers share specific figures, name team members, and speak directly about their successes and failures. "Everything is transparent. The manager says—this team member lost five clients, that one closed seven deals. That would never be done publicly in Serbia. We're more concerned with other people's feelings." Switzerland is slightly more masculine, valuing success, open evaluation, and individual achievements, while using failure as a learning tool. Serbia, as a feminine culture, emphasizes harmony and avoids public criticism (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010; Janićijević, 2003; Palombi *et al.*, 2023).



6.4. EXTERNAL COLLABORATORS AND TRUST

Trust in Swiss business culture is built slowly. “It took four years for them to trust me. Eventually, I was invited to meetings with the directors of all key departments—sales, post-sales, automation... I was the only woman among men who had been there for 20+ years.” This behavior is characteristic of long-term orientation, where trust is earned over time through consistency and loyalty—not through quick results or formal titles (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010). In Serbia, there is a tendency toward short-term orientation. In the sales and customer support sectors, this is reflected in the focus on meeting immediate goals and customer needs, while investment in long-term relationships and strategic loyalty planning is often secondary (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010). Janićijević (2003) also notes that Serbian business culture tends to preserve existing patterns and aim for short-term effects.

6.5. EMOTIONAL EXPRESSION AND PERSONAL STYLE

Swiss colleagues often interact “without smiling,” rarely show emotions, and keep communication formal. Appearance and presentation matter more in Serbia, where traits like warmth, diplomatic tone, and relational orientation are common (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010). T.J.’s example shows how these cultural specifics can strengthen business communication and negotiations, demonstrating high cultural intelligence—the ability to recognize and apply value and behavior differences for successful outcomes (Janićijević, 2003; Radojević *et al.*, 2024; Lamberti *et al.*, 2025).

6.6. HIERARCHY AND POWER DISTANCE

T.J.’s delayed invitation to high-level management meetings reflects cultural differences in power distance. In Switzerland, with a low PDI, authority relies on merit and professional trust, making integration gradual but not formally hierarchical (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010). In Serbia, authority is clearly defined, enabling faster inclusion of external collaborators through personal contacts, yet reinforcing top-down control (Janićijević, 2003). These contrasts highlight the need to adapt leadership styles to local cultural values, particularly in multicultural teams (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010; Janićijević, 2003; Đurić & Đurić, 2009). Research further shows that individualism and masculinity enhance project dynamics, while uncertainty avoidance can hinder control in such teams (Palombi *et al.*, 2023).

In addition to these cultural differences, T.J. shared internal data from her company that confirms the efficiency of the Serbian customer support team. A study conducted by the Saldo portal, which analyzed 224 emails sent to Swiss web shops, revealed that the best result—an average response time of 16 hours with 100% accurate information—was achieved not by Swiss employees but by a Serbian support team based in Belgrade, led by T.J.

This example highlights the high level of professionalism and adaptability of the Serbian workforce, rooted in the collectivist spirit and feminine nature of Serbian culture—emphasizing interpersonal care, patience, and client dedication—which represents a significant competitive advantage in the service sector.

This is not only a professional success, but also evidence that a high standard of customer experience can be achieved through effective management of intercultural differences and team synergy. Radojević, Stanišić, and Stanić (2019) suggest that in service sector recruitment, attention to employees’ national culture is beneficial, as traits such as collectivism and restraint contribute to higher customer satisfaction.

7. CONCLUSION

The comparison of sales and customer support in Serbia and Switzerland shows that Hofstede’s cultural dimensions are practical frameworks shaping organizational processes, leadership, communication, and customer service. The case study with T.J. illustrates these cultural differences through variations in training, decision-making, and trust-building. In this context, it is evident that Swiss organizations favor low power distance, individual responsibility, and professional detachment, while Serbian workplaces value collectivism, emotional connection, and hierarchy. Cultural dimensions strongly influence innovation—countries with lower power distance, higher individualism, and long-term orientation show greater innovativeness, explaining part of the Serbia–Switzerland gap (Espig *et al.*, 2022). Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov (2010) note that organizations reflect their cultural codes, as confirmed by T.J.’s experiences and other studies showing that collectivist cultures, through teamwork and solidarity, often achieve higher customer satisfaction (Radojević *et al.*, 2019; Espig *et al.*, 2022).



In practice, it is important to emphasize that due to significant cultural variation within nations—including differences among Swiss citizens themselves, as well as among members of other nations—it makes sense to use questionnaires and instruments for measuring the individual values of employees. This approach can help identify individuals who, regardless of their national background, possess desirable value orientations on key cultural dimensions. While national averages offer useful guidance, selection of candidates in international teams can be further improved by considering personal values, especially in cases where they deviate from the dominant cultural patterns of their country of origin.

Future research should focus on quantitatively validating qualitative findings, as well as analyzing specific sectors such as IT, healthcare, and construction. Special attention should be given to virtual environments and remote work to better understand cultural differences in geographically dispersed teams. In this way, Hofstede's model remains a valuable tool for designing sustainable and inclusive organizations in a global business context.

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