Dutch and Slovaks

Why are we the way we are?

Meeting minutes

Place: DVSK office, Bratislava, Slovakia
Time: August 11th
Speaker: Abram Muller
Audience: Jan Lamber Voortman and DVSK team (Peter Kobes, Peter Steiner, Martin Ret, Boško Milakovič, Milan Skuhra, Martin Michna, Marek Branický, Vladimír Janov)
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Purpose of the meeting and this document

Purpose of the meeting

• To explain Dutch mentality, culture to Slovaks and vice versa.
• To comprehend why we are the way we are
• To learn from each other

Goal of this meeting and document

To improve our:
• Communication with Davinci Amsterdam
• Cooperation with Davinci Amsterdam
• Efficiency of the projects

Purpose of the document

• To deliver the message of the meeting to the members of the other teams, who were not present at the meeting and also for the new employees
• To record the moments and the atmosphere of the meeting for the future
Who is Abram Muller?

Abram Muller on the Facebook

• a Dutch living in Slovakia for more than 15 years (having Slovak citizenship)
• former lecturer at Dutch studies, Comenius University
• a professional tourist guide for foreigners coming to Bratislava
• co-owner of an agency promoting Slovakia in Netherlands
• a significant part of the Dutch minority (total number of 2 😊)
• the author of several books and publications about Slovakia, Czech Republic etc.
**Presentation**

**Stereotypes**

First of all, AM explained us that it is very delicate to talk about stereotypes because they never express the whole truth – you can always find a contrary example. Therefore it is important to comprehend stereotypes as a generalization, not as the complex truth.

**AM (Abram Muller):**

*First I’d like to discuss with you stereotypes (generalizations). What are stereotypes? We do know several stereotypes: Of a nation, country, culture, religion…Stereotypes are made by people from outside, they tell us how people from outside observe others.*

*Example of stereotypes:*

**Nation**

- **French:** patriotism, strikes, eating frogs, wine
- **English:** tattoos, bad weather, tea, nice grass, ugly women
- **US:** “we’re the best”, poor geographical knowledge, Coca-Cola, democracy
- **Dutch:** red light district, cheese, tulips, light drugs, flat country
- **Slovak:** hospitality, very pretty women, beautiful countryside

**Religion**

- **Muslims:** Allah, Koran, terrorism, emigration to Europe
- **Buddhists:** quite and modest people, temples in high hills, Tibet
- **Jews:** 2nd world war, holocaust, money, business
- **Catholics:** Jesus, Pope, Christmas, forgiveness, love

Other stereotypes of: ethnics, women
My opinion - even more - my philosophy is that in the end, we are all the same. Every person has the same dreams, ideas, ambitions, goals and these are peace, security, maybe family life, work, material comfort...

It is true though, that we differ from each other in how to realize these dreams, goals, ideas.

In order to overcome these differences, we need to communicate. Nowadays, English is a common language for understanding the differences in our culture and mentality and for learning how to work together.

How come we are all born the same and still we differ from each other? This has to do with cultural background. Let’s look at Dutch culture:

Dutch culture

Landscape
- Flat country, wide horizon, lots of water

The barriers built to protect the land from the sea level
- The desire to broaden his look, to look beyond the horizon is in every person of us.
- For Dutch it was always very easy to travel
• *In the past the horizon on the sea was a challenge, so the Dutch said “Let go, let’s explore the world!” That’s one of the reasons that the Dutch like to explore and travel and see new things!*

**History**

• Holland was always placed between 3 world powers: France, Germany and England
• Thus, there was always a need to resist by uniting against these powers
• More than 300 years of independence and of a civilian society of tradesman and townspeople, a society where civilians have the power and are opposed to Kings, Nobility, Church.
Religion

- Along with “Civilian society” supported and supporting, came Protestantism in the form of Calvinism – protest movement against world and church powers.
- Protestantism helped the Dutch in their fight against authorities
- Specifics of Calvinism:
  - A person is only responsible to God, not to a Pope, King or other authority. This is a very important reason for the self-responsibility of Dutch people!
- Netherlands has became a country where many famous individuals, persecuted in other countries, found refuge (Comenius, Voltaire).

Dutch are anti-authorial people:

- The king in Netherlands has no power
- The parliament and the church is strongly opposed and controlled by the people
- Dutch have no strong political leaders. There is constant interaction between politicians, parliament and the people.

Resume

- Flat landscape, sea, water
- Surrounded by 3 strong countries
- Civilian society
- No strong powers within

In order to maintain this situation you need order.

Visit the Netherlands and this is the first thing you notice:

- Farmland, houses in rows, towns and even nature are planned to its deepest details
- This is the result of Dutch culture and has a huge impact on mentality
- Dutch are – or try to be – precise, clear, open, communicative, strict, tolerant.
Slovak culture

Now, let's have a look at Slovaks:

**Landscape**

- Slovak landscape is made up of mountains, hills, woods. Where there are mountains, there’s immediate horizon. People lived in valleys in small, isolated, societies and they needed each other to survive, their families and closest neighbors. The next village or town was always far away.
- Their direct leaders were the village authorities: the priest, nobility, sometimes a teacher. People depended on them.
History
• Slovaks have been ruled for almost 1000 years by others.
• They were only allowed to be farmers, village people, there were almost no Slovak towns people and therefore there was no chance to build up a civilian society.

Religion
• Slovakia is a strong catholic country (almost 70% of people identify themselves as Roman Catholics).
• We can observe that the Church has had a great power in all our history and people always respected it as an authority.
• Nowadays, the situation is quite different; many young people do not consider the Church as something important between them and God.

Resumé
• There’s a tendency of Slovaks to be depended of their authorities, to look up to them, even wish for their authorities to lead them and show them their way in life. This results in choosing and voting for “strong” politicians.

Comparison
• Where Dutch needed the whole society to survive (flat landscape and 3 strong powers around), the isolated Slovaks cared about their closest ties.
• Slovaks are closed in character and have a tendency to only take care and find help in their closest families and friends. You notice this tendency in politics, where it is called clientelism.
• So, no individuality, no broad solidarity.
• It is not easy to be Slovak:
  Dutch have had freedom and independence for over 300 years, Slovaks only 16 years (emancipation started in 1918).
• Still, our nations exist both as long (700/800 years).

But now, the world is finally opening up for you, and for most of the people it is a shock. The elderly people have no chance to keep up.

Slovaks proved their strength to survive for more than 1000 years. After Hungarians, Nazis and Communist, they finally liberated and separated themselves in 1993.

AM expressed himself that according to him the Dutch and many other nations wouldn’t survive all these historical “tests” if they were on the Slovaks’ place.

Politically you have already a place in the world (EU, NATO, OECD), even in sports you might finally reach the world summit in football which is the best promotion all over the world. But if Slovakia and Slovaks want this to be long term and to keep up with the world, they need to change their mentality as well. Learn languages, travel, communicate, observe with an open mind, learn from these observations and not to be afraid to change, open up.

My firm opinion is: we were all born the same and we all die the same. In essence, there is no difference between nations, between Dutch and Slovaks, and if there is any, it is called misunderstanding. We should learn from each other, Dutch from Slovaks and Slovaks from Dutch, because we need each other, because we all share the same goals in life. Forget the stereotypes. It’s about you!
Questions during the meeting

Vladimír Janov to AM: *What were the reasons to come right to Bratislava, Slovakia?*

AM explained that after his studies of “Sovietology” (Eastern Europe belonged to Soviet Union from 1948 till 1988/1989) he has always tried to understand our culture and mentality. After the revolution in 1989 everything has changed and the door opened itself for everybody. And the primary reason? As usual: “Cherchez la femme” 😊
Remarks after the meeting

Peter Kobes remarked that AM’s historical-geographical-social research explains the reason of our usual “lack-of-input-information” issue between the DVSK and DVG groups. The typical situation is when DVG provides DVSK with some input information about the project or task and DVSK people expect, that all the information is provided to them at the first time (authority that tells them what to do). However, DVG people are used to communicate and they consider the very first meeting as an “intro” to the further discussions, where all the issues will be communicated in dialog.

Marek Branický asked AM which 3 things Slovaks should learn from Dutch and vice versa. AM responded that Slovaks should learn from Dutch to be more communicative, to open up and to care a little bit more about others. On the contrary, Dutch should learn to take things in “more easy” way and also to care more about their family and relatives.

Peter Steiner remarked: “I completely disagree, that Dutch guys are punctual, and I think that this is not really the case. They are always full of energy, new ideas and new visions, but realization is another topic. On the other hand I think Slovaks are more thinking on how to make some of those ideas happen, and if we stuck on data input, we stop working. Here we can learn from each other the most according to my feelings. We should think more widely in ways how to fix problems, we should try to communicate in more clear way, state opened questions, so the other side has to think of the answer and give us more input.”

Martin Michna’s remarks: “I think it was a very interesting lesson. It gave me a new view on the Slovak people. For me, this was the best explanation about our nationality evolution. It was so important for understanding each other.”

Vladimír Janov expressed himself that this was the best analysis of the Slovak people he ever heard with very important-added value, that is, how to improve our common communication.

Boško Milakovič remarked: „Mr Muller is a very interesting man. The presentation wasn’t just some boring talk but it has philosophical "smell" also. For me, as a foreigner in Slovakia, this topic is on a daily basis already for 16 years! I thought that it would go away with time but it's "still here". It's hard to say who is "wrong" and who is "right". After all these years I learned that the most important thing is to understand that somebody is different and to accept it. I can't change others (it will be stupid to want that) but I can change myself. I think about that as a good thing, as "prosperity" of myself. Something that people who live in their homeland their whole live do not have."
Milan Skuhra remarked: „I expected something different. But it was interesting too. I expected something more practical. Maybe with some concrete examples of typical behavior in certain situations. I thought that I will learn more about Dutch mentality, than about ours, nevertheless I understand a bit more.“

Martin Ret’s remarks: “It was a pleasant talk; Abram was friendly and easy to listen to. I was little bit disappointed by some of his opinions, for instance referring to French people as communists due to unions and strikes (which is historically incorrect IMHO). He made a couple of good points why are Slovak people oriented on smaller Communities comparing to Dutch for instance. If the whole session helped me in the communication with Dutch colleagues I honestly don’t know.”
Amsterdam

Bratislava

Tulips

High Tatras

Gouda cheese

Parenica cheese

EVERYTHING is planned (1st thing you spot)

EVERYWHERE are attractive women (1st thing you spot)