



## Defense Against Negative Strategic Communications

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**Abstract:** Strategic messaging is ever more important in the age of explosive social media, and not all information on the Internet is benign. Negative information campaigns were used by Hitler in the Austrian Anschluss, and more recently by Vladimir Putin in the annexation of Crimea and the conflicts in Donetsk and Luhansk. Similarly, seeds of public dissent and discord have been entering through Russian trolls and bots into American social media.

Central and Eastern European countries are particularly vulnerable to negative messaging from Russia, or even from terrorist groups. This article delves into cultural paradigms of the US, Russia and numerous Central and Eastern European societies to uncover cultural areas of vulnerability to outside influences; how the cultural underpinnings of power, competition, individualism, uncertainty avoidance, long term orientation and indulgence can highlight openings to negative influences. It concludes with ideas for nations to guard against unwanted information attacks.

**Keywords:** Propaganda, strategic communications, culture, Hofstede, Central Europe, Eastern Europe.

Strategic messaging is ever more important in the age of explosive social media. So much information flows to and through societies, governments and individuals that any attempt to organize and make sense of the data is welcome for its ability to be consumed. Not all information on the Internet is benign. Some individuals and organizations work to manipulate the information to represent their views. Some go beyond and use information as a tool to persuade. Some governments weaponize data into propaganda to purposefully harm other nations.

Central and Eastern European countries are particularly vulnerable to negative messaging from Russia, or even from terrorist groups. This article will use Geert Hofstede's cultural framework to illuminate cultural weaknesses of Central and Eastern European countries that can be exploited by malevolent outsiders. It considers how cultural characteristics make nations vulnerable to propaganda, and how nations can use their cultural strengths to combat this scourge.

## **Geert Hofstede's Cultural Paradigm**

In his book, *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind, Intercultural Cooperation and Its Importance for Survival*,<sup>1</sup> Dr. Hofstede presents six underlying pillars of every culture. He calls these indices: Power Distance, Individualism, Masculinity, Uncertainty Avoidance, Long-Term Orientation, and Indulgence. Whether a country's sense of nationalism, a business's organizational culture, or a private club's way of doing business, all established groups develop and maintain a culture that can be arrayed using these indices. Understanding these pillars of any society can illuminate potential strengths and weaknesses toward foreign influences.<sup>2</sup>

For example, the Power Distance Indicator (PDI) highlights the use of hierarchy in a country. If a country has a rigid class system with numerous layers, then it has a high PDI. If societal layers are more fluid and the hierarchy flat, then it has low PDI. In high PDI countries, separation between the elite and the proletariat is almost complete. Centralized management, rigid inequality and formal rules mark the world of governance. There are seemingly non-ending chains of superiors without decision authority, and relations between subordinate and superior are based on emotion. Might trumps right, the leaders have privilege power and status, autocratic and oligarchic government are based on co-optation, and the elites are protected from consequences of scandals. Hierarchies can be tall and rigid, like military organizations, or have only a few impermeable layers as seen in poorer countries with a small middle class. According to Dr. Hofstede, cultures with a high PDI quotient include Romania, Russia, Serbia, and Slovakia.<sup>3</sup>

Hofstede arrays countries by their individualism versus collectivism (IND). Countries high on the IND index are known for their individualism, rights to privacy, merit promotion, and equal treatment under the law. The United States and Great Britain are two of the most individualistic countries in the world. More collectivist countries honor the group over the individual and seek harmony and consensus over self-actualization. In low IND groups, prevailing opinions are determined by group membership, the state plays a key role in the economic sys-

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<sup>1</sup> Geert Hofstede, Gert Jan Hofstede, and Michael Minkov, *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind, Intercultural Cooperation and Its Importance for Survival*, 3rd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov, *Cultures and Organizations*.

<sup>3</sup> Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov, *Cultures and Organizations*.

tem, and rights differ by group. In these countries, relationships trump tasks, the social network is the main source of information, and people are born into families that protect them throughout life in exchange for loyalty. Countries with high IND quotient include Hungary, Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania, Poland and the Czech Republic. Romania, Slovenia and Serbia represent countries that are more collectivist.<sup>4</sup>

The Masculinity Index (MASC) distinguishes a society's sense of competition versus cooperation, assertiveness versus modesty. In a highly masculine society, importance is placed on earning, recognition, advancement and challenge, versus a more feminine society where the goal is to have good working relationships, a desirable living situation and employment security. In more masculine societies, the gender roles are separate and distinct. Men are responsible, decisive and ambitious; women are caring, gentle and support the success of their men. In highly masculinized societies, men are subjects and women are objects, sexual harassment is an issue and homosexuality is seen as a threat to society. In feminine government, politics is based on coalitions, governments aid the needy, and international conflicts are best settled through negotiation and compromise. Highly masculinized countries include Slovakia, Hungary and Poland, whereas more feminine societies include Latvia, Slovenia and Lithuania.<sup>5</sup>

Uncertainty Avoidance (UAI) measures the extremes to which a society's people will go to avoid encountering the unknown. "The evil that I know is better than the good that I don't" could be their slogan. In high UAI countries, uncertainty is a constant threat that should be avoided or fought. Ambiguity and unfamiliar situations cause stress, and what is different is considered dangerous. Rules and laws are important, precision and formalization are desired. There is an inherent belief in experts and technical solutions. Citizens are not interested in politics, and civil servants tend to have law degrees. There is a preponderance of precise laws and unwritten rules. Xenophobia, nationalism, and protecting the "in group" are important facets of high UAI countries. Russia, Poland, Serbia, Romania and Slovenia are high on the UAI scale, while there are no Central or Eastern European countries that are low on the UAI scale. The rest fall in the middle.<sup>6</sup>

In the Long-Term Orientation (LTO) scale, persistence, thrift, ordered relationships and a sense of shame are important, versus a shorter-term orientation that honors reciprocation, respect for tradition, protecting face, and personal stability. In societies based on high LTO, work values include honesty, accountability and self-discipline. What is good or bad is situationally determined, adaptiveness and learning are important. The focus is on market position and profits in ten years. Countries high on the LTO scale include Ukraine, Estonia, Lithuania, Russia and Belarus.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov, *Cultures and Organizations*.

<sup>5</sup> Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov, *Cultures and Organizations*.

<sup>6</sup> Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov, *Cultures and Organizations*.

<sup>7</sup> Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov, *Cultures and Organizations*.

Indulgence versus Restraint (IVR) measures happiness, life control and the importance of leisure. In restrained societies, gratification is curbed and controlled by strict social norms. These societies exhibit a sense of helplessness, moral discipline, cynicism, pessimism and a lower percentage of happy people. Here, freedom of speech is not a main concern, though maintaining order is. There are no Central or Eastern European countries high on the IVR scale. Those gathered on the extremely restrained side include Latvia, Ukraine, Albania, Belarus, Lithuania, Bulgaria and Estonia.<sup>8</sup>

By highlighting these six pillars of cultural paradigms, Dr. Hofstede provides clues to societal vulnerabilities and natural defenses from fake news and other malicious information operations.

### **Example: USA versus Russia**

President Vladimir Putin comes from an overarching culture that believes strongly in inherent hierarchy, and Putin wants to be at the top of the heap (PDI 93), which he sees as a benefit for the greater global good (IND 39 and MASC 36). He has a strong need to control (UAI 95), and is willing to play the long game (LTO 81 and IVR 20) to achieve his vision of success.<sup>9</sup>

By contrast, President Donald Trump was borne of a culture of flat hierarchies (PDI 40) and very high individualism (IND 91), where anyone with a dream and enough gumption can “make it.” The US overarching culture is fairly competitive (MASC 62), risk takers (USAI 46) with little restraint (IVR 68), and a very short attention span (LTO 26).<sup>10</sup>

It would be fair to suspect that Putin sees the US as a very easy mark to influence through propaganda. He likely sees the US as narcissistic children with short attention spans who can be easily hooked through social media, addictive as it is. He can appeal to America’s sense of superiority, to its inherent optimism and future focus to undercut public messaging through a thousand messages on the Internet. Those messages will irritate and cause some confusion, but are just enough under the pain threshold to be ignored as attention stays riveted to phones and computers, to “likes” and “shares.”

Russia’s high uncertainty avoidance is noted in the Washington Post on a front-page article entitled “The Putin Generation,” where a young journalist is quoted as saying: “What the Russian soul demands, is that there be one strong politician in the country who resembles a czar.”<sup>11</sup> The article also states that even though Putin controls the main television channels, security services and judiciary, most of the country supports him. They feel he will stand up to US ag-

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<sup>8</sup> Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov, *Cultures and Organizations*.

<sup>9</sup> Based on the data in Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov, *Cultures and Organizations*.

<sup>10</sup> Based on the data in Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov, *Cultures and Organizations*.

<sup>11</sup> Anton Troianovski, “The Putin Generation: Young Russians are Vladimir Putin’s biggest fans,” *The Washington Post*, March 9, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/world/wp/2018/03/09/feature/russias-young-people-are-putins-biggest-fans>.

gression, and that he can keep everything in balance. One 18-year-old is quoted as saying that open government corruption is upsetting, “but this is no time for an untested leader ... making change could lead to the collapse of the country.”<sup>12</sup>

Fake news swarms the American information space more each year. When the US wakes up to the nuisance and danger that it is, how much damage will have been done and will it be able to further repel the negative information invasion? On the positive side, the very cultural bias that can be exploited to Putin’s advantage, is also the saving grace that can pull the US out of the trap. IND and IVR wrapped in patriotism and love of freedom will eventually awaken the American society to the danger and are the keys to resisting the fake news invasion.

### European Cultural Frameworks

What about European countries? What clues can culture provide on their vulnerabilities? Germany is more like the US than Russia, with lower PDI 35, mid IND 67 / MASC 66, and UAI 65 that is between US 46 and RU 95. Both GE and RU are longer term oriented and more restrained than not. It would be interesting to study the profiles of Georgia and Ukraine, but there is not enough data in this model to be of assistance. Ukraine is very long term oriented and very restrained. Georgia falls in the low to mid-range on both LTO and IVR. The other four criteria have no data, so there is just not enough here to plot a course.<sup>13</sup>

In another article, this author discussed the combination of high PDI and high UAI and how environments with those characteristics were ripe for dictators as the population honored rigid hierarchies and were so uncertainty averse as to do almost anything, suffer almost any circumstance just to know the likely outcome of any daily transaction. The countries that still have that cultural profile include Russia (PDI 93 / UAI 95), Romania (PDI 90 / UAI 90), and Serbia (PDI 86 / UAI 92). The danger with this profile is the acceptance by the common person that inequity is normal coupled with the willingness to do anything to keep the status quo. In this environment, a bully could force his way in through media or force and declare a new order with fair amount of success.<sup>14</sup>

Other countries that have a mid-range PDI with high uncertainty avoidance include Croatia (PDI 73 / UAI 80), Slovenia (PDI 71, UAI 88), Bulgaria (PDI 70 / UAI 85) and Poland (PDI 68 / UAI 93). These countries still cling to the status quo, but give less credence to a rigid hierarchy. Collectivism is the norm in Croatia (IND 33), Slovenia (IND 27) and Bulgaria (IND 30), with Poland more individualistic (IND 60).<sup>15</sup> What this means in terms of an aggressive negative strategic communications plan is that outside forces would want to target elements of the uncer-

<sup>12</sup> Troianovski, “The Putin Generation.”

<sup>13</sup> Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov, *Cultures and Organizations*.

<sup>14</sup> Judith Reid, “Cultural Foundations of Transparent Governments,” *Connections: The Quarterly Journal* 16, no. 2 (2017): 81-89.

<sup>15</sup> Based on the data in Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov, *Cultures and Organizations*.

tainty avoidance. How could outsiders upset the sense of predictability to make segments of a population cling to malicious messages? They would not have the advantage of high PDI, meaning a recognition that rigid hierarchy is normal, so the combination of high uncertainty avoidance (the world as we know it is changing fast) with high collectivism (and we are all in it together) would be the key approach to propaganda. Less “strong man” and more “every man is in danger.”

Hungary has an interesting profile. It shows mid-range PDI 46, and high individualism 80, high masculinity index 88, and high uncertainty avoidance 82. Long term orientation 58 and Indulgence 31 are both mid-range.<sup>16</sup> With the high IND, MASC and UAI, Hungary is likely vulnerable to messages of inadequacies of the male ego.

Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia each have low PDI scores (44, 42, 40), and mid-range uncertainty avoidance (63, 65, 60). They vary somewhat in individualism (70, 60, 60) and in masculinity (9, 19, 30) but not by much.<sup>17</sup> A low PDI and mid-range UAI would signal that negative messaging should address a general sense of unease, exploit an uncertainty that is common to most people within each country, such as a sense of safety or scarcity.

Cultural vulnerabilities are most often opaque within one’s own society, which can easily make recognizing these societal cracks difficult to see.

## How an Outsider Can Use Cultural Clues to Influence

At its root, propaganda is an exaggeration of collective emotions.<sup>18</sup> How does an outsider pull the emotional strings inside another country?

*Time orientation.* Cultures are past, present or future oriented.<sup>19</sup> Leaders should pay attention to outside messages that pull public emotions into the time orientation that corresponds to the culture at risk. In Venezuela, Hugo Chavez’s method of gaining the middle-aged vote was to conjure up the past when the government was “mired in corruption, incompetence, and poor management.”<sup>20</sup>

*Rational language.* According to Jason Stanley in *How Propaganda Works*, language is a mechanism that allows negative strategic messaging to work. It presents an idea as rational, when upon closer examination, it is not. The negative statement is not exactly lying, rather it presents a truth while encouraging the reader to fill in the detail to create an overall emotional message that can

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<sup>16</sup> Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov, *Cultures and Organizations*.

<sup>17</sup> Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov, *Cultures and Organizations*.

<sup>18</sup> Jason Stanley, *How Propaganda Works* (Princeton University Press, 2015).

<sup>19</sup> Edward T. Hall and Mildred Reed Hall, *Understanding Cultural Differences: Germans, French and Americans* (Boston, MA: Intercultural Press, 1990); Edward T. Hall, *Hidden Differences: Doing Business with the Japanese* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/ Doubleday, 1987).

<sup>20</sup> William J. Dobson, *The Dictator’s Learning Curve: Inside the Global Battle for Democracy* (New York: Doubleday, 2012).

override rational judgment.<sup>21</sup> For example, shortly after the mass shootings at Stoneman-Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, there were on-line stories of victims really being “crisis actors” and Russian bots engaging the gun control debate in order to sow chaos and confusion into the crisis.<sup>22</sup>

*Over Simplification.* Michael Barson and Steven Heller in *Red Scared!: The Commie Menace in Propaganda and Popular Culture*, note that “propaganda is based on the creation of recognizable stereotypes that oversimplify complex issues for the purpose of controlling mass opinion.” Using this approach, the US government encouraged anti-communist “Red-baiting” during the Cold War through the mass media of the time.<sup>23</sup>

*Snowball Conspiracy.* Lisa-Maria Neudert of the Oxford Internet Institute’s computational propaganda project (<http://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/>) notes that Facebook and Google’s advertising technologies target specific groups and individuals with misleading and conspiratorial content since that content generates the most engagement and keeps readers “on the page,” a key metric used by social media giants. Guillaume Chaslot, a former Google engineer, says the algorithms used in social media are designed to keep people engaged. For example, a conspiracy video that is favored by the algorithm encourages others to upload similar videos corroborating the conspiracy, which increases the retention statistics and continues the snowball until the conspiracy appears to be somewhat credible. This creates what Neudert calls an “environment that maximizes for outrage.”<sup>24</sup>

In summary, outside agents could bend time references to influence a society, or use a combination of rational language, over simplification, or snowball conspiracy to twist the truth. If they use these pathways to hit a society where it is culturally vulnerable, then the results could be very effective. In highly collective societies (low IND), only a few opinion leaders would need to believe a fake news story for the collective body to be easily lead down a dangerous path.

## How an Insider Can Use Propaganda to Reinforce Authoritarian Rule

Malevolent leaders have used strategic messaging to control their societies throughout time. They have used the techniques noted above, but also have an inside advantage and thus more tools at their disposal.

*Chaos and division.* In Hugo Chávez’s Venezuela, after winning the support of the general population, he championed it against everyone else. He disallowed

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<sup>21</sup> Stanley, *How Propaganda Works*.

<sup>22</sup> John Kruzel, “How Russian Trolls Exploited Parkland Mass Shooting on Social Media,” *Politifact*, February 22, 2018, <https://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/article/2018/feb/22/how-russian-trolls-exploited-parkland-mass-shootin/>.

<sup>23</sup> Michael Barson and Steven Heller, *Red Scared!: The Commie Menace in Propaganda and Popular Culture* (San Francisco, CA: Chronicle Books, 2001).

<sup>24</sup> Mathew Ingram, “Fake News is Part of a Bigger Problem: Automated Propaganda,” *Columbia Journalism Review*, February 22, 2018, <https://www.cjr.org/analysis/algorithm-russia-facebook.php>.

dissent, calling those who questioned his brand of revolution “‘traitors,’ ‘criminals,’ ‘oligarchs,’ ‘mafia,’ and ‘lackeys of the United States.’ Although he originally promised to break the political parties in order to return power to the people, Chavez ... centralized nearly all power in his own hands.”<sup>25</sup>

*Fear.* María Corina Machado, co-founder of an election watchdog group in Venezuela noted that Venezuelans did not believe the elections were secret. About 5.6 million people there depended on government income and believed that their preferences could be seen by the government, so they perpetuated the public adoration of President Chavez to protect their income. As Ms. Machado notes: “Fear does not leave fingerprints. ... It has been Chavez’s biggest and best-used instrument from day one.”<sup>26</sup>

*Uncertainty.* In 2009, President Chavez closed 34 radio station for “administrative infractions,” and announced hundreds more were under investigation. The government never identified the other stations at risk for investigation, which kept the entire industry in check. In this way, the media could exist, but the content was censored by those very radio stations for fear of retaliation.<sup>27</sup>

*Political apathy.* According to William Dobson, “Widespread political apathy is the grease that helps any authoritarian system hum. And in the smoothest-functioning authoritarian systems, the regimes have gone to great lengths to turn disinterest in political life into a public virtue.”<sup>28</sup>

Chaos, division, fear, uncertainty and political apathy can all contribute to negative messaging in order to control a society. As noted earlier, many Central and Eastern European countries are high on the Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI), a cultural element that makes it likely to fall prey to these tactics, particularly when coupled with a high PDI index that reveres strict hierarchy.

## **How a Nation Can Protect Itself**

Negative strategic messaging is very subliminal. The most important defense is to see negative information campaigning for what it is. This article has attempted to expose opaque pockets of susceptibility in Central and Eastern Europe. Below are methods to counteract negative messaging from any source.

*Open discussion.* Free and open discourse in the public arena is key to uncovering “fake news” and other messages streaming into online and public consciousness. The public should counter political apathy by discussing current events with a wide variety of people with differing views.

*Freedom of the press.* The news and information feeds to the public need to remain free of bias and come from many differing viewpoints. An independent media is essential for exposing wrongs, conspiracies and corruption. Free TV and public media help disseminate a wide variety of political and social viewpoints.

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<sup>25</sup> Dobson, *The Dictator’s Learning Curve*.

<sup>26</sup> Dobson, *The Dictator’s Learning Curve*.

<sup>27</sup> Dobson, *The Dictator’s Learning Curve*.

<sup>28</sup> Dobson, *The Dictator’s Learning Curve*.

*Critical thinking.* According to Jason Stanley, “the antidote is to retain a core of critical thinking, to question emotional messages and to fact check anything that smacks of fake news. Deconstruct the message to uncover the fixed truth (assumed) versus the variable that takes the message into falsehood. Think of what facts are omitted, ponder the inverse of the message. Reset the conversation to focus it appropriately.”<sup>29</sup>

*Humor.* In Hugo Chavez’s Venezuela, the opposition created a public communications campaign of a Miss Venezuela who refused to give up her crown and was now old and ugly as a way to suggest that the current president should relinquish his position. Humor undermines the other’s authority and is the best cure against fear.<sup>30</sup>

To help a nation move more toward openness and better critical thinking, it should tap into its cooperative and collaborative side (lower MASC). It should minimize those elements that insist on always being right and lean toward elements that promote open discourse. Nations may also want to work to increase elements of indulgence a bit more (IVR) so that the desire to maintain order can give way to freedom of speech.

## Conclusion

Information warfare is widespread throughout the world. Those who cultivate it against other nations have studied the cultural vulnerabilities of their enemy. They use emotional language, irrational logic, over simplification and snowball conspiracy to soften the defenses of the enemy. To successfully fight the information war, Central European leaders and citizens should encourage open discussion, freedom of the press, critical thinking and humor. Humor knows no fear.

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<sup>29</sup> Stanley, *How Propaganda Works*.

<sup>30</sup> Dobson, *The Dictator’s Learning Curve*.

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