

## Negotiating with The Netherlands

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### Abstract

*This article aims at providing an understanding of both the Romanian and Dutch cultures by analyzing them from the cultural dimensions provided by Edward T. Hall (1976), Geert Hofstede (1980) and the GLOBE Study (2004). In doing so, the author will start by mapping the Romanian and The Netherlands country profiles and at the same time will make an analysis of the two countries from selected cultural perspectives, i.e. Hall's, Hofstede's and the GLOBE models. The empirical research of this paper will be the done by means of a participant observation, a semi-structured interview and a survey among professional buyers and sellers doing business in these two countries. With this the author will attempt to sketch the profile of a Dutch and of a Romanian negotiator.*

**Keywords:** *business negotiation, national culture, participant observation, interview, survey, The Netherlands, Romania*

### Introduction

This article aims at providing an understanding of both the Romanian and Dutch cultures by analyzing them from the cultural dimensions provided by Edward T. Hall (1976), Geert Hofstede (1980) and the GLOBE Study (2004). In doing so, I will start by mapping the Romanian and The Netherlands country profiles and at the same time I will make an analysis of the two countries from selected cultural perspectives, i.e. Hall's, Hofstede's and the GLOBE models. The empirical research of this paper will be the done by means of a participant observation from my own experience as a buyer doing business in the Netherlands. In addition I will use a semi-structured interview of my Dutch colleagues' doing business in Romania highlighting the gained learning and a survey among professional buyers and sellers doing business in these two countries. With this I will attempt to sketch the profile of a Dutch and of a Romanian negotiator. Finally, I will present the conclusions.

### The Dutch Cultural Analysis from the Cultural Perspectives

Looking at Hall's dimensions, according to Gerritsen (2002, p. 8) the Dutch are a low context and monochromic culture. A Dutch person will

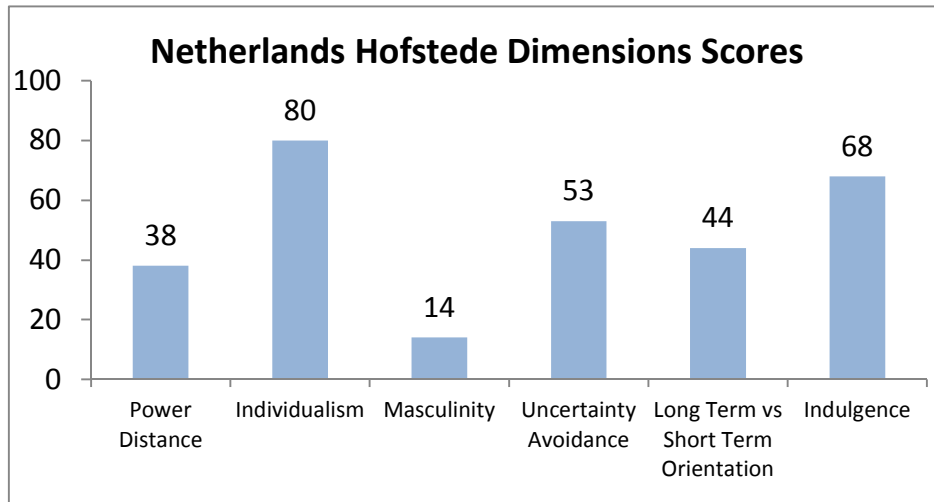
analyze his words very carefully in order to make sure that the counterpart will understand clearly what he means. No background details are expected, no underlying meaning can be found and the information needs to be concise, to the point and with the right details. Most of the meaning can be deduced from the words that are said. Furthermore, looking at the monochronic side of this culture, Gerritsen (2002, p. 5) gives the example of a Dutch audience that expects a presentation to be structured and the structure to be vigorously followed. In addition, a Dutch audience will give a lot of importance to the overview of the presentation in contrast to a polychromic culture that would appreciate more a metaphor or a joke at the beginning of a presentation.

Moving forward to the Hofstede dimensions, The Netherlands scored high on individualism, low on power distance and masculinity and medium on uncertainty avoidance and long term orientation. Furthermore, the Dutch scored high on the new dimension of indulgence. Table 2 below shows the exact scores the Netherlands obtained on each of the dimensions.

Looking at power distance, the managers in the Netherlands have a preference for involving the subordinates and they rely on their own experience in decision making rather than the use of formal rules. Dutch managers are expected to be modest and to consult the employees in the decision making in the organization, training decisions and optimum use of their skills in the company. Here the attitude towards managers is informal and on a first name basis and communication is participative.

With a high score in individualism, the Dutch individuals are expected to take care of themselves and their immediate families only. At work, promotions are expected to be based on merit only and tasks are more important than relationships.

Table 1: The Netherlands Score on the Hofstede Dimensions<sup>1</sup>



The Netherlands is a feminine society with a score of 14 which means that the dominant trait here is the preference for quality of life. The work/ life balance is very important and a manager is expected to be supportive towards his employees. Decisions are made through consensus and conflicts are resolved through negotiations until consensus is reached.

With a score of 53 on the uncertainty avoidance, the Netherlands has only a slim preference for this dimension. High uncertainty avoidance suggests a preference for rules, codes of behavior and security seeking. At work there is a need for punctuality and for working hard.

The medium score of 44 shows a weaker tendency towards long term orientation, dimension associated with persistence, sense of shame, thrift and ordering relationships.

With a score of 68 The Netherlands is clearly inclined towards Indulgence. The Dutch tend to satisfy their impulses and desires to have fun and enjoy life and spend money as they wish. At the same time they are positive and optimists. There is a high emphasis on leisure time and life enjoyment.

Finally, we will look at The Netherlands from the GLOBE dimensions perspective. The Dutch society has low power distance and independent thinking is nurtured by managers in an organization.

<sup>1</sup> <http://geert-hofstede.com/netherlands.html>

Employees are treated and rewarded based on their contribution to the organization and ranks; titles and status are not the drivers.

Netherlands ranks amongst the higher uncertainty avoidance countries in the GLOBE study and this result is consistent with the Hofstede conclusions. The same conclusion as Hofstede was on the gender egalitarianism, the Dutch valuing this dimension. There is tolerance for diversity and also an emphasis on the nurturing of diversity through committed efforts.

As far as assertiveness is concerned, the Netherlands is found between the high ranking groups. The Dutch are famous for their ability of "saying no", of expressing their feelings and communicating clearly their opinions.

In Societal Collectivism (I) the Dutch scored high showing that they respect socially legitimated institutions and they have shared objectives. There is great emphasis on the team/ group and the tasks and rewards are attributed to the group rather than individuals.

On the other hand, the score obtained in the In-Group Collectivism (II) section suggests that the Dutch do not take extensive pride in their organization, community or family and there is little cohesiveness with the just mentioned.

There is high future orientation here and people believe that their actions will affect the future and believe in planning in order to develop their future.

The Netherlands has a high performance orientation and gives importance to knowledge, taking initiative, autonomy, focus on future, planning, task and result orientation and a sense of urgency in accomplishing tasks. (Bik, 2010, p. 84) It is important to mention that personal achievements have priority over a certain background or seniority.

Humane orientation scored low in the Netherlands suggesting that individuals in organizations are neither encouraging nor rewarding fairness, altruism, generosity.

Table bellow shows the scores obtained the Netherlands on the GLOBE dimensions.

**Table 2: The Netherlands Score on the GLOBE Dimensions<sup>2</sup>**

ACH	FUT	ASS	COL I	COL II	GEN	HUM	POW	UNC
4.32	4.61	4.11	4.46	3.70	3.50	3.86	4.11	4.70

Scale 1-7 with higher scores indicating greater societal values

ACH – Performance Orientation

FUT – Future Orientation

ASS - Assertiveness

COL I – Collectivism I

COL II – Collectivism II

GEN – Gender Egalitarianism

HUM – Humane Orientation

POW – Power Distance

UNC – Uncertainty avoidance

### **The Romanian Cultural Analysis from the Cultural Perspectives**

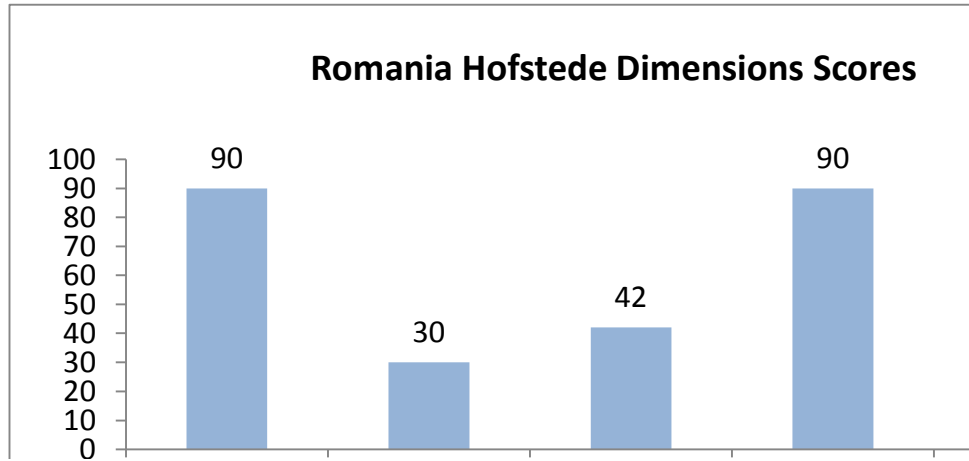
According to Edward T. Hall, Romania is a high context culture with a mix of monochronic and polychronic. If the Dutch are careful in choosing their language due to the fact that they want to make sure there is no misunderstanding, the Romanians will be even more careful but for a different reason: they want to make sure that nobody is offended and they do not want to be perceived as immature or naïve. Interpersonal relations are important for Romanians and sometimes deadlines are flexible, however punctuality has its importance showing the monochromic and polychromic elements combined.

Proceeding to the scores that Romania obtained for the Hofstede cultural dimensions, Romania scored high in Power Distance, Uncertainty Avoidance and medium in Long Term vs Short Term Orientation. On the other hand the scores of Individualism, Masculinity and Indulgence were low. Bellow, in Table 3 the results can be seen.

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<sup>2</sup> Thierry, H., den Hartog, D., Koopman, P., Wilderom, C., 1998, Culture and Leadership in a Flat Country, The Case of the Netherlands, GLOBE

Table 3: Romania Score on the Hofstede Dimensions



Compared to The Netherlands where the attitude at work is informal and employees are expected to be involved in the decision making process, Romania, with a score of 90 ranks among the highest in the PDI Index. Here people accept a certain hierarchical order which is not contested and no justification is necessary. There is an authoritarian leader that controls all decision making and the rest of the population is following the directions. Employees do not disagree with their managers and seek their approval and protection and at the same time avoid taking responsibility for the decisions made.

In Individualism Romania scored low, 30, again on the opposite side of the scale from The Netherlands with a score of 80. We can say that Romania is a collectivistic country where the society is fostering strong relationships and members of a group take responsibility for each other's wellbeing and at the same time, individuals obey the rules of the group they belong to. However, the group is subdivided in numerous groups of interests that promote their members based on mutual benefits at the expense of the welfare of the other members.

Romania is a relatively feminine society and from this cultural dimension perspective it is similar to The Netherlands. People value equality in society and are less competitive when it comes to promotion and personal achievement. The roles of men and women are not pre-determined in the society and women can advance in management positions if they desire without the need of affirmative actions.

With a score of 90 Romania has a clear preference for avoiding uncertainty. Ambiguous situations and different opinions of people are not something that Romanians deal easily with and there is a strong emotional need for rules even when they do not function. Security is the driver in the individual motivation.

The medium score of 52 shows a tendency towards Short Term Orientation, dimension associated with respect for tradition, preservation of face and fulfilling social obligations. Romanians do not like planning for a long period of time and use past experiences in showing how things in the present could be dealt with.

While the Dutch have a clear tendency towards indulgence, the Romanians are a society of restraint. The score of 20 shows an inclination towards pessimism and cynicism and there is a strong control over the gratification of the individual's desires. As opposed to the Netherlands that is one of the most free and tolerant societies in the world, the Romanians have the perception that their actions are restrained by social norms and feel guilty when indulging themselves.

Moving to the GLOBE study it is worth mentioning that Romania was not part of the original pool of countries. However, as Bibu et al, (2008, p. 4) mention, in 2006, a study conducted by a consortia of 12 Romanian universities from different regions tried to replicate the House et al study (2004) by using the same research methodology. The analysis is based on 362 questionnaires on societal culture. Based on the results of the study, Bibu et al. (2008, p.6) conclude that *the Romanian societal culture is converging at societal practices level with the Eastern European cluster as defined by the GLOBE research, while being very different as compared to Nordic Europe.*

Table 4 bellow shows the scores obtained by Romania in the local study.

**Table 4: Romania Score on the GLOBE Dimensions**

ACH	FUT	ASS	COL I	COL II	GEN	HUM	POW	UNC
3.51	3.33	4.14	3.75	5.43	3.88	4.09	5.63	3.66

Scale 1-7 with higher scores indicating greater societal values

ACH – Performance Orientation

FUT – Future Orientation

ASS - Assertiveness

COL I – Collectivism I

COL II – Collectivism II  
GEN – Gender Egalitarianism  
HUM – Humane Orientation  
POW – Power Distance  
UNC – Uncertainty avoidance

Romanians scored high in Power Distance, In-Group Collectivism and Gender Egalitarianism, low in Uncertainty Avoidance, Institutional Collectivism, Humane Orientation, Future Orientation and Performance and middle on Assertiveness. Based on these results we can say that Romanians are hierarchical with tendency towards the group, however with societal practices that foster individualism. They have a certain level of assertiveness, do not encourage performance and are focused on the present rather than the future.

Comparing the above results with the Hofstede study conclusions we can say that they are consistent as far as Future Orientation, Gender Egalitarianism and Power Distance are concerned.

### **The case study**

The first empirical part of this paper is based on the perceptions gained through my experience as a Romanian strategic buyer of industrial components in the Netherlands and my immersion in the Dutch culture. In addition, after interviewing some of my colleagues that dealt with Romanian negotiators I will mention the highlights of their experiences. Finally, based on the concepts analyzed I have made a set of questions which I have sent to professional buyers and sellers doing business either in Romania or The Netherlands or dealing with both countries.

For the first part of the qualitative research I have chosen as method the participant observation as a result of the years of working between Dutch nationals. This method involves observing and interacting with the subject of interest while actively participating in the setting as well as getting close to the research participants.<sup>3</sup>

For the second part of the case study I have used the semi-structured interview which is an interview without any set format but in which the interviewer might have some key questions formulated in advance. These types of interviews allow questions based on the

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<sup>3</sup> [http://www.sagepub.com/ritzerintro/study/materials/reference/77708\\_3.1r.pdf](http://www.sagepub.com/ritzerintro/study/materials/reference/77708_3.1r.pdf)



interviewee's responses and proceeds in a friendly and non-threatening conversation.<sup>4</sup>

The last qualitative method used was a qualitative survey in which I used an open-ended questionnaire. This was sent to professional buyers and sellers operating in the countries of interest for this paper.

### *Participant observation - The Netherlands*

I have chosen to move to the Netherlands 7 years ago right off the benches of the University with the hope of developing a successful career in an Western company and a western working environment.

I have chosen the Netherlands and so I started my work as a buyer in a multi-national company. With no working experience in a Romanian setting it was very difficult to build any expectations. Being educated in a hierarchical society and despite the lack of Romanian work experience it was challenging getting used to the Dutch way of management. Moving beyond the first name basis approaches and the unassuming behavior of any employee I was mostly stunned by the approach of my managers towards me. Once my target setting was done I was expected to reach it based on my own decisions and drive and in an autonomous manner. Since I still had little working experience I could count on coaching and mentoring which was done from a partnership standpoint rather than a top down approach. Staff meetings were brainstorming sessions of all the employees participating and giving their opinions on what should be done and decided as a purchasing department.

As a general working behavior, the breaks taken and the social discussions were short and as a consequence overtime working was avoided and more time could be dedicated to our families and personal life. Driving your own goals and deciding for your own schedule gives more control in your agenda and work independence and time can be spent more effectively. In addition, personal time is very important to the Dutch employee and one values one's leisure time.

Travelling to other company locations in Europe but mostly Italy where a lot of time was dedicated to the social life of the office but with long working days, highlighted the level of efficiency and self-drive of the Dutch employee.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/unstructured-interview.html>

I have started my work as a member of a team of negotiators with no real interaction in the negotiation itself but mostly in the preparation work. In this way I could take my time in observing and learning the behaviors of certain cultures in this situation. Slowly I moved into the position of main negotiator leading the discussion from a buyer's standpoint. The business partners were from all around the world with different backgrounds but I will focus on the behavior of the Dutch party.

Before any negotiation there is at least one preparation meeting deciding on the desired result and no leading person is nominated since that position is already clear to the members of the team. The manager will take a backup position while the buyer is the one leading the conversation. There is always a clear separation of responsibilities and roles.

All meetings start with a strong handshake which needs to be emphasized since weak handshakes are not appreciated by the Dutch. The no-nonsense attitude dominates the whole process of negotiation and it begins with the short introduction discussions. They are mostly solely linked to the travel for the meeting and to the general health of the company each party represents. Almost no time is dedicated to personal questions except for the last minutes before leaving the meeting room after wrapping up the discussions.

All the meetings, with no exception, start with going through the agenda, which was also previously shared between the parties. Sticking to the points of the agenda is crucial and no change of topic is allowed unless the previous topic was closed. The general Dutch attitude towards the negotiation is a Win-Win one with the clear focus on longer relationships and a mutual satisfaction of the partners. The history of The Netherlands with centuries of trade experience made the integrative approach of expanding the pie as the preferred solution. They are generally not aggressive in discussions but correct and the final offer will probably be close to the starting offer. Price is the main driver in the discussion and the Dutch are willing to do business with any nation as long as certain criteria are met. This Dutch openness and willingness to give opportunities to any business partner is highly appreciated by the counterparts and I have also been told during negotiations that this trait is not found among many nations and as a consequence highly valued. This can be an explanation for why the Dutch were pioneers in investing in Romania after the revolution and they are currently the leading investor with almost 25% of the Foreign Direct Investments in Romania.

*Interview - Romania*

I will focus now on the Dutch impressions of the Romanians and I will mention the experience of one Dutch colleague, Jan Willem, who dealt with Romanian companies over the last 12 years.

One of his first interactions was 12 years ago when working as a buyer for a Dutch company he had to travel to the east of Romania to visit a supplier that was experiencing quality issues on the casting parts. Arriving on time in the day of the meeting, Jan Willem was asked to wait for 10 minutes in the waiting room on the pretext that the director of the company was busy. When finally he was asked to enter the office, he found himself in a very large room with a desk at the end where the director was sitting, writing something down and not looking up. *"I entered this huge room and the director was sitting down, trying to look busy and did not even stand up to shake my hand and welcome me. It was clear that he has been there for the whole time, leaving me in the waiting room on purpose. I was the buyer and I was welcomed in this manner but I tried to keep an open mind."* When inquiring Jan Willem why he thinks that the director acted in this way, he answered: *"I do not know. I think because he wanted to show his importance in the company. It happened to me before in the Czech Republic."* After finally getting to business, there was a realization that the Director did not speak any English or German thus an interpreter was needed. In addition, through the whole conversation Jan Willem observed that there was almost no eye contact from the director. *"Detached? Arrogant? Tactics?"*. A factory tour followed in order to determine what happened with the parts and the quality control. Jan Willem noticed that an operation was not performed as it should have been and highlighted to the director the fact and how it should be fixed. *"Then one of the most shocking events in my career happened. I will never forget this. The director fired on the spot the employees responsible for this quality failure mentioning he can find replacements at any time. It was never my intention for this to happen."* The quality issues were never fixed and the Romanian supplier business had to be eventually re-sourced to another supplier.

The Dutch, who are a feminine society with low power distance could not understand how a manager can treat his employees in this manner choosing to replace them rather than explain and provide the right training towards improving their performance.

*"I also had contact with other potential suppliers in Romania. They appeared to be corrupt so I stopped. In this culture there was a lot of communistic*

*influence as I perceived it. The people were not pro-active, they were only doing what they were ordered to do. Also, they were taking no responsibility."*

However, lately the situation has improved since Jan Willem visited Romania again last year in order to identify potential new suppliers. *"It was very different. The sales people spoke perfect English and their attitude was very Western-like. They could have been from any country. Maybe it is a new generation."* The change in attitude can be attributed to the adherence to the EU in 2007 and the desire and tendency of the Romanians towards the Anglo group as defined in the GLOBE study.

### ***Survey***

For the Survey I have put together an open-ended set of questions as mentioned below.

- a. Please name 3 weaknesses and 3 strengths of the Dutch negotiator.*
- b. Please name 3 weaknesses and 3 strengths of the Romanian negotiator.*

For the respondents that have never had contact with a Romanian counterpart:

- c. Based on your perception/ expectation please name 2 cultural traits of the Romanian negotiator.*
- d. What issues do you expect to occur in a Dutch-Romanian negotiation?*

The majority of my respondents base was made of Dutch negotiators and as a consequence question (b) was mostly ignored and replaced instead by (d) and (e).

- Please name 3 weaknesses and 3 strengths of the Dutch negotiator.*

When looking at the first question and focusing on weaknesses, the most prevalent answer was directness. However, some of the respondents saw this characteristic as both a weakness and a strength, depending which culture was looked at it. The lack of understanding of the other culture was another weakness of the Dutch however they found that creativeness, thinking out of the box and generally keeping an open mind was counterbalancing this particular weakness. The Dutch perceive themselves as arrogant: *"Dutch people can be arrogant; or phrase it different: they have a great belief in their own knowledge and skills and this can come back as a boomerang during a negotiation."* The win-win approach was identified by most of the respondents highlighting the desire for long term relationships.

Some respondents perceived this characteristic however as a weakness: *“we are using the polder model, looking too easily for compromise.”* The non-Dutch respondents saw this trait as generating soft negotiators. As a final remark, received from all the non-Dutch respondents, was the fact that the Dutch, who are a non-hierarchical society, get rather quickly to an informal approach which can be misunderstood as detachment.

- *Please name 3 weaknesses and 3 strengths of the Romanian negotiator.*

Unfortunately the respondents' base was not knowledgeable enough in this field and as a consequence I advise this question for future research.

- *Based on your perception/ expectation please name 2 cultural traits of the Romanian negotiator.*
- *What issues do you expect to occur in a Dutch-Romanian negotiation?*

The above two questions can be combined since most of the respondents chose to answer both in the same exercise.

The Dutch believe that they have a prejudice against Romania because of its communistic past. *“Dutch people have some prejudices regarding Romania. I do not know if there is a big trust in Romanian products. I think, due to this, that Romanian negotiators are already one step behind and need to gain trust and prove themselves during negotiation more than other parties from the Western Europe.”*

Corruption was found to be the biggest fear among the Dutch respondents in addition to the importance of the hierarchy that they expect to find among Romanians. Both of these characteristics are anticipated to have a negative influence on the final result of the negotiation.

Finally, due to the fact that Romania is a manufacturing industry oriented country, similar to Germany, knowledge of foreign languages could be limited, again as in Germany. In comparison, the Netherlands economy is running on trade and as a consequence the level of proficiency in foreign languages of the Dutch is relatively high.

### Conclusions

In the light of the economic developments of the past decades and the clear understanding of the potential and preference of the Dutch for the Romanian economy I have focused on the relationship between these two countries. Limited literature can be found on the Romanian – Dutch relationship.

The aim of this paper was to provide an understanding of both Romanian and Dutch cultures by analyzing them from the cultural dimensions provided by Edward T. Hall (1976), Geert Hofstede (1980) and the GLOBE Study (2004).

The empirical segment of the paper consisted of a participant observation, a semi-structured interview and a survey among professional buyers and sellers. The goal was sketching the Dutch and Romanian negotiator profile. I have tried to create a balance between cultures and opinions by means of choosing the respondents. If the first section of the empirical part was based on my own experience as a buyer doing business in The Netherlands for the past 7 years, the second section was based on the Dutch experience doing business in Romania over the past 12 years. Finally, the last segment was based on input from international buyers doing business in The Netherlands and Romania.

Unfortunately, I did not have an extensive access to respondents with valuable negotiating experience in Romania and as a consequence I would advise for future research in this area. After the fall of communism Romania has gone through a transition period that generated a fast paced change and therefore the culture is going through an intense transformation process as well. This has been intensified since the country's accession to the European Union. More research should be done on the economic transition effects on the Romanian culture.

In addition, the perception of the people that did not have any relation with Romania before, shows that more needs to be done in order to improve the image that the country, its industry and business people have in the West of Europe.

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