

**Followership in Russia:
Understanding Traditions and Exploring Meaning of Current Reality**

Yulia Tolstikov-Mast

Lead Faculty and Associate Professor in Global Leadership
Indiana Institute of Technology, USA

Abstract

This paper uses a western theoretical foundation of followership as a framework for a limited, empirically-derived perspective of Russian followers. The author argues for the importance of new cultural research by which Western theories may be reevaluated and a new understanding established of Russian followership. A rationale for research on Russian followership is also proposed.

Introduction

Leadership scholarship has long recognized that effective leaders should have a clear understanding of their subordinates or followers' roles and behavior (Bass, 2008; Blight, 2011; Lapierre & Carsten, 2014). At the same time, the main focus of the leadership scholarship has always been on leaders' view of subordinates and leader-follower dynamics (Bass 2008; Blight, 2011; Lapierre & Carsten, 2014). Although the importance of the follower-centric approach has been recognized in the past (e.g., Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995, Meindle, 1995), empirical studies are still limited (Carsten, Uhl-Bien, West, Patera, McGregor, 2009; Lapierre & Carsten, 2014). At the same time, the follower-centric approach or followership is critical as it "adopts the follower as the primary focus and explores how followership behaviors are related to organizational outcomes of interest" (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995, p. 223).

Empirical interest to Russian leadership has increased in the past decade (e.g., Grachev & Bobina, 2006; Omeltchenka & Armitage, 2006). Existing research helps to understand characteristics of Russian leaders, reasons for their leadership behavior (e.g., paternalism,

charismatic, and autocratic behavior), and a leader's perspective of leader-follower dynamics (e.g., Grachev & Bobina, 2006; Javidan & House, 2002; Omeltchenka & Armitage, 2006). At the same time, Russian followership or followers' view of an organizational reality and influence of followers' behavior on organizational outcomes has never been explored (Zamulin, 2009). Thus, as the Russian public increases its political activity (RIA Novosti, 2012), as democratic values steadily establish themselves as popular values (Carnaghan, 2007), and as the Russian State actively shows self-confidence and assertiveness to the world (Druzhinin, 2014), it is important to explore the image of a Russian follower. Understanding characteristics of contemporary Russian followers and follower-leader interactions and influences will help leaders of international organizations to establish realistic leadership and management strategies in Russia.

Current Understanding of Followership

The past several decades brought an increased interest in followership and recognized a robust empirical position that the essence of leadership is followership (e.g., Baker, 2007; Blight, 2011; Kelley, 1988, 1992; Lapierre & Carsten, 2014). Research uncovered: diverse followership roles (contrary to a traditional view of only one passive role) (Baker, 2007; Carsten, Uhl-Bien, West, Patera, & McGregor, 2010); the importance of viewing follower-leader relationships in a specific context (Baker, 2007); and the need to focus on followers' (rather than leaders') perspectives of followership to understand followers view of themselves (Carsten et al., 2010). One of the most important contributions of followership scholars is an articulated distinction between followers and subordinates (Hinrichs & Hinrichs, 2014). Traditionally, followership literature assumed that since followers typically function at lower organizational levels and have less power, authority, and influence, follower and subordinate roles should be viewed as equal (Hinrichs & Hinrichs, 2014). This argument was also explicitly evident in empirical literature

when followers were operationalized as lower level employees (e.g., Russell, 2003; Schyns & Felfe, 2006). To oppose this linear view on followers, Hinrichs and Hinrichs (2014) argue in favor of the importance of hierarchical differences within organizations as those differences create a unique context for followers' behavior.

Other works asserted that followers perform a courageous responsibility to mitigate organizational reality (Chaleff, 1995) and have established self-concepts that interact with leaders' expectations (Howell & Mendez, 2008). Hosking (2007) proposed a "fluid" approach to leadership-followership dichotomy by advocating that leader-follower relationship is not a simple process, and leaders and followers can exchange roles. Finally, Lapierre and Carsten (2014) and Uhl-Bien, Riggio, and Carsten (2014) identify the strong emerging stream of research indicating that followers are active contributors to leadership processes. In summary, this emerging perspective suggests that followers get the job done, work in the best interests of the organization's mission, are able to change, actively support leaders' decisions, and learn from their leaders (Lapierre & Carsten, 2014).

Overall, it is evident that followership research is assuming a more active follower role that is contextually bound, fluid, and incorporates human elements of followers (e.g., human dignity as noted in Hinrichs & Hinrichs, 2014). Simultaneously, questions of cultural variations as follower's characteristics or a concept of a global follower still have not received deserved attention. The next section provides a brief overview of literature on Russian subordinates.

Who is a Russian Follower?

Literature on Russian followership is very limited in Russian as well as Western scholarship. Scarce conclusions state that the follower-leader dynamic in Russia is very unique based on geographic and climate factors, political and economic influences, and historical

traditions of leadership-public relationship and collective memory of those relationships (Zamulin, 2009). In addition, there is another factor that complicates an understanding of the Russian followership. For centuries, Russian and international public, politicians, and scholars have been debating about Russian cultural values. Are they more Eastern or Western (Raleigh, 2012)? Finally, recent “blind” adoption of Western management concepts and literature in Russia, created a situation where Russian organizational reality is viewed and interpreted through a Western lens (Omeltchenka & Armitage, 2006; Zamulin, 2011).

All of these factors are significant in determining the current meaning of the Russian followership and the meaning of Russian follower-leader relationships. At the same time, these factors have primarily been addressed by historians who examined the past evolution of the Soviet public and public sphere (e.g., Raleigh, 2012; Yurchak, 2005), or the younger generation of Russians (Mankoff, 2010).

Although there is no direct social science research on Russian followership, practitioners’ observations, management textbooks, and limited Western and Russian studies addressed behavior of Russian subordinates. As mentioned above, there is an emerging distinction between subordinates and followers in Western literature (Hinrichs & Hinrichs, 2014). This paper supports the view that “subordinates defer to superiors out of obligation, followers choose to differ to a leader because they believe, based on their evaluation of dimensions such as the leader’s moral character, courage, effort, or ideas, that the leader’s direction is worthy of support” (Hinrichs & Hinrichs, pp. 92-93, 2014).

While agreeing that Russian culture is characterized by high power distance (Hofstede, 1993), this paper also advocates that power distance orientation is shifting in Russia. It is a subtle but a noticeable process toward a decreasing power distance (Naumov & Petrovskaja, 2010).

Based on this fact, this paper suggests separating Russian subordinates and followers based on obligatory hierarchical relationships with a leader for the former, and relationships that are based on genuine support and free-will for the latter. Considering that existing Russian and Western literature denotes Russian employees only as subordinates, this paper presents information that addresses this traditional view. Simultaneously, it cautions not to blindly transfer knowledge of Russian subordinates to understand Russian followers.

The primary focus of management literature has always been on Russian leaders (Zamulin, 2011). Research on Russian subordinates is incomplete and meaningful empirical conclusions are limited. In practitioner literature, for example, a typical complaint about Russian subordinates by foreign managers still includes reluctance to accept responsibility for their mistakes or shortcomings (Gesteland & Nytoft, 2013) and lack of participation in decision making (Neverovskaya, 2012). Popular management books explain that the leadership expectations of Russian subordinates are shaped by both Russian culture and years of living and working under state socialism (Thomas & Inkson, 2003). At the same time, management texts suggest that Russian subordinates are able to adopt to their international supervisors to accomplish tasks (Boyacigiller, Goodman, & Phillips, 2004) and their work values are changing as a result of market experience (Cardona & Morley, 2013). More specifically, “centralization, obedience, discipline, career, and strong power are being replaced by personal identity; focus on real needs, collectivism, innovation, and decentralization” (Cardona & Morley, 2013, p.138). There is no Russian-specific and easily identifiable subordinate-centric research. Simultaneously, there are recent studies focusing on Russian management or relationships between foreign management and Russian employees that can be helpful in building an understanding of a Russian follower. According to Holden and Vaiman (2013), Russian talent management

strategies are dysfunctional due to unchanged Soviet mentality of Russian employees, as Russians still gravitate to authoritarian rule, subside to the power of their boss, mistrust institutions, and follow unchanged talent management approaches with a tradition of limited empowerment. Using Hofstede's framework and instrumentation, Kuchinke and Ardichvili (2008) explored work-related cultural dimensions of over 4,000 respondents from ten manufacturing companies across six countries (including Russia). The study revealed that some cultural values could be more malleable than others. For example, power distance and masculinity in Russia were substantially different (less and higher, respectively) from earlier research. Based on these findings, it is plausible to assume that Russian subordinates are becoming more comfortable in power relations and more individualistic in their orientation. In addition, current research shows that Russian subordinates believe that trust is essential for professional relationships with their managers, but are still tolerant to mistrust due to a habitual expectation of mistrust between a Soviet manager and subordinate (Cardona & Morley (2013). It is also apparent that in for-profit and not-for-profit organizations Russian employees value intrinsic motivation including meaningful work with possibilities to professional and personal growth (Maaniitty, 2012).

Overall, existing literature on Russian subordinates revealed that Russian employees at a lower organizational level still have shortcomings in decision making and accepting ownership of their responsibilities, as well as gravitating to authoritarian rules. At the same time, subordinates' work values are increasingly changing as employees are becoming more comfortable (possibly even egalitarian) with their supervisors and more individualistic or independent and self-reliant in their behavior. Finally, employees put emphasis into trust among

coworkers as well as between managers and subordinates, and look for meaningful manager-subordinate relationships, professional development, as well as fulfilment from their work.

Research Gap and Social Construction of Reality Perspective

Even though limited observations still allow for preliminary conclusions about characteristics of current Russian subordinates, this knowledge cannot be applied to understanding Russian followers due to the power and obligation context associated with subordinate roles. Concurrently, as a flip side of leadership, followership is a critical organizational process associated with organizational performance and even organizational existence. Followers' support of an organization's mission and vision and a meaningful partnership with leaders create a synergistic force that constitutes organizational strength and survival. On the contrary, followership problems are displayed through poor work ethic and morale, distraction from goals, as well as lost opportunities.

Considering the importance of follower-centric research, as well as the current lack of knowledge about Russian followers, empirical investigation of the phenomena is important for both scholarship and practice. Even though a Western conceptual understanding of followers should be taken into consideration, an exploratory research should be approached as indigenous research that accounts for Russia's unique cultural context. Value of indigenous or local culture research, where Western theories are re-evaluated or new understanding of a previously examined Western phenomena is established, has been strongly advocated by international scholars (e.g., May & Stewart, 2013).

Finally, exploratory study will benefit from a social construction of reality perspective used by previous Western scholars to examine Western followership (Carsten et. al, 2010). According to this perspective, a notion of reality is deeply embedded in sociological thought, and

reality becomes apparent only through the processes of socialization within that reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Thus, an understanding of Russian follower roles, behavior, and follower-leader relationships is possible through questioning Russian follower self-perceptions.

References

- Baker, S. D. (2007). Followership. *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies*, 14(1), 50-60. doi: 10.1177/0002831207304343
- Bass, B. (2008). *The handbook of leadership: Theory, research, and managerial applications* (4th ed). New York, NY: Free Press.
- Berger, P. L. & Luckmann, T. (1966). *The social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.
- Blight, M. (2011). Followership and follower-centered approaches. In A. Bryman, D. Collinson, K. Grint, B., Jackson, & M. Uhl-Bien. *The Sage handbook of leadership* (pp. 425-436). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Boyacigiller, N. A., Goodman, R. A., & Phillips, M. E. (2004). *Crossing cultures: Insights from master teachers*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Carnaghan, E. (2007). *Out of order: Russian political values in an imperfect world*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Carsten, M. K., Uhl-Bien, M., West, B. J., Patera, J., L., & McGregor, R. (2010). Exploring social constructions of followership: A qualitative study. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 21, 543-562.
- Cardona, P., & Morley, M. J. (2013). *Manager-subordinate trust in different cultures*. New York, NY: Routledge
- Chaleff, I. (1995). *The courageous follower: Standing up to and for our leaders* (2nd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler.
- Druzhinin, A. (2014, December 5). Russia's new assertiveness as member of BRICS. *RIA Novosti*. Retrieved from <http://en.ria.ru/authors/20140512/190460856/Russias-new-assertiveness-as-member-of-BRICS.html>
- Hofstede, G. J. (1993). Cultural constraints in management theories. In J. T. Wren (Ed.), *The leader's companion* (pp. 253-270). New York, NY: Free Press.

- Gesteland, R., & Nytoft, N. (2013). Danes managing people in Russia. *Ledelse I Udvikling*, 2, 36-38. Retrieved from http://www.ais-prog.dk/02_kulturtraening/crosscultures_russia.pdf
- Graen, G. B., & Uhl-Bien, M. (1995). Relationship-based approach to leadership: Development of leader-member exchange (LMX) theory of leadership over 25 years. Applying a multi-level, multi-domain perspective. *The Leadership Quarterly* 6(2), 219-274.
- Grachev, M. V., & Bobina, M. A. (2006). Russian organizational leadership: Lessons from the GLOBE study. *International Journal of Leadership Studies*, 1(2), 67-79.
- Hinrichs, K. T., & Hinrichs, A. T. (2014). Comparing followers and subordinates: Accounting for the effects of organizational hierarchy. In L. M. Lapierre & M. K. Carsten (Eds.), *Followership: What is it and what do people follow?* (pp. 89-105). Bingley, UK: Emerald.
- Holden, N., & Vaiman, V. (2013). Talent management in Russia: Not so much war for talent as wariness of talent. *Critical Perspectives on International Business*, 9(1/2), 129-146.
- Hosking, D. M. (2007). Not leaders, not followers: A postmodern discourse of leadership processes. In B. Shamir, R. Pillai, M. C. Bligh, & M. Uhl-Bien (eds.). *Follower-centered perspectives on leadership: A tribute to the memory of James R. Meindl* (pp. 243-264). Greenwich, CT: Information Age.
- Howell, J. P., & Mendez, M. J. (2008). The three perspectives on followership. In R. Riggio, I. Chaleff, & Lipman-Blumen, J. (Eds.). *The art of followership: How great followers create great leaders and organizations* (pp.25-40). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Javidan, M., & House, R. (2002). Leadership and cultures around the world: Findings from GLOBE: An introduction to the special issue. *Journal of World Business* 37(1), 1-2.
- Kelley, R. E. (1988). In praise of followers. *Harvard Business Review*, 66(6), 141-148.
- Kelley, R. E. (1992). *The power of followership*. New York, NY: Doubleday.
- Kuchinke, P. K., & Ardichvili, A. (2008). Work-related values of managers and subordinates in manufacturing companies in Germany, Georgia, Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Russia, and the U.S. *Journal of Transnational Management Development* 7(1) 99-117.
- Lapierre, L. M., & Carsten M. K. (2014). *Followership: What is it and what do people follow?* (pp. 89-105). Bingley, UK: Emerald
- Maaniitty, T. (2012). Why bother? Work-related motivational factors among Russian professionals (Unpublished master's thesis). Saimaa University of Applied Sciences, Lappeenranta.

- Mankoff, J. (2010). Rethinking Russia: Generational change and the future of U.S.-Russian Relations. *Journal of International Affairs*, 63(2), 1-18.
- May, R., & Stewart, W. H. (2013). Building theory with BRICs: Russia's contribution to knowledge sharing theory. *Critical Perspectives on International Business*, 9(1/2), 147-172.
- Meindl, J. R. (1995). The romance of leadership as a follower-centric theory: A social-constructionist approach. *The Leadership Quarterly* 6, 329-341. doi:10.1016/1048-9843(95)90012-8
- Mendoza, A. H. (2008). The problem of translation in cross-cultural research on emotion concepts (Commentary on Choi & Han). *International Journal for Dialogical Science* 3(1), 241-248.
- Naumov A., & Petrovskaia, I. (2010, November). Evolution of national culture impact on managing business in Russia in 1996-2006. *Eurasian Review* 3, 76-87.
- Neverovskaya, N. (2012). How not to lose royalties. *BigRussia*,: Business investment guide to Russia, 9-10. Retrieved from <http://www.bigrussia.org/magazine/bigrussia-2012-09/bigrussia-2012-09-article15/>
- Nickolsky, A. (2012, March 4). People's front to remain active after elections – Putin. *RIA Novosti*. Retrieved from <http://en.ria.ru/russia/20120403/172583617.html>
- Omeltchenka, A., & Armitage, A. (2006). Leadership prototypes: A Russian perspective. *Baltic Journal of Management* 1(3), 315-338.
- Raleigh, D. (2012). *Soviet baby boomers: An oral history of Russia's Cold War generation*. Oxford University Press, New York: NY
- Russell, M. (2003). Leadership and followership as a relational process. *Educational Management & Administration*, 31(2), 145-157.
- Schyns, B., & Felfe, J. (2006). The personality of followers and its effect on the perception of leadership: An overview, a study, and a research agenda. *Small Group Research*, 37(5), 522-539.
- Shamir, B. (2007). From passive recipients to active co-producers: Follower' roles in the leadership process. In B. Shamir, R. Pillai, M. C. Bligh, & M. Uhl-Bien (Ed.). *Follower-centered perspectives on leadership: A tribute to the memory of James R. Meindl* (pp. ix-xxxix). Greenwich, CT: Information Age.
- Thomas, D., & Inkson, K. (2003). *Cultural intelligence: People skills for global business*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler.

Uhl-Bien, M., Riggio, R. E., Lowe, K. B., & Carsten, M. K. (2014). Followership theory: A review and research agenda. *The Followership Quarterly*, 25(1), 83-104.

Yurchak, A. (2005). *Everything was forever, until it was no more: The last Soviet generation*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Zamulin, A. L. (2009). New outlook on followership: Theory and management practices. *Vestnik Saint-Petersburg University*, 8(3), 75-97.

Author Biography

Dr. Yulia Tolstikov-Mast is an Associate Professor and the Lead Faculty at the Ph.D. program in Global Leadership at Indiana Tech. She relocated to the United States from Russia in 1996 and made Indiana her home. Dr. Tolstikov-Mast has 20 years of experience both in higher education and business sectors; and her previous positions include advising international students, teaching Russian as the Second Language, managing international relations in the first international trade organization in the South of Russia, as well as small business management, academic administration, and teaching undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral level courses at various universities in the USA. Dr. Tolstikov-Mast is actively engaged with local communities and has provided training in Russian business class, cultural competencies, intercultural communication, and global leadership across Midwestern states. Currently, she is the Advisor to Global Leadership Certificate at International Center in Indianapolis, IN.

Dr. Tolstikov-Mast scholarly interests include organizational culture of transnational companies, followership and leadership in modern Russia, multicultural leaders, dyadic adaptation in international professional interactions, and scholar's integrity and predatory publishers. Her case studies are published in *Developing Your Global Mindset: The Handbook for Successful Global Leaders*. Currently, Dr. Yulia Tolstikov-Mast teaches a wide range of research courses as well as global leadership and communication courses at the doctoral level. She also actively contributes to the Ph.D. program curriculum development. Her signature course is Global Leadership Research where she partners with international universities (e.g., Russia, Peru) to provide hands-on education in international research for her students.

Yulia Tolstikov-Mast holds a B.A. in Linguistics from Rostov State Pedagogical University, Russia; M.A. in Professional Communication from Purdue University (Fort Wayne); and Ph.D. in Communication from The University of Memphis.