International Journal of Cross Cultural Management, Available online 5 February 2026
DOI: 10.1177/14705958261421785

"We are not like them". The generational shift in leadership perceptions in an emerging market

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Abstract

This study examines the evolving leadership identity among a new generation of Russian business leaders, challenging the temporal stability of static cross-cultural frameworks. Based on qualitative interviews with 30 MBA graduates in Moscow, Russia, the findings propose a model of hybrid leadership characterized by confidence, result-driven inspiration, relational care and ingenious concept of *otvetstvennost* (ownership and moral responsibility). The research reveals a significant shift in leadership perceptions, where emerging leaders favor participative, humane-oriented, and transformational leadership styles over traditional authoritarian approaches. However, this transition is marked by a sociolinguistic tension: a persistent reluctance to internalize the term "leader" despite demonstrating leadership behaviors. This generational shift is theorized as an identity struggle between entrenched national prototypes and global managerial exemplars. The implications suggest that leadership development in transitional economies functions as an "identity laboratory," requiring programs that reconcile local cultural nuances with evolving global standards.

Keywords: leadership identity, social identity, culture, Russia

Introduction

In Russia, where leadership is pivotal to societal and organizational success (Kets de Vries et al., 2004), management education has lagged behind the country's socio-economic changes since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. At the time of the writing, no Russian business school holds EQUIS accreditation, although prior to 2022, two institutions were accredited, compared to 26 in the UK and 22 in China. This underdevelopment is driven by factors such as low demand for formal training, limited financial support, and the absence of longstanding educational traditions (Gill and Negrov, 2021; Naumov and Puffer, 2000).

To improve leadership programs, understanding the national context is essential. Programs that replicate Western leadership models, such as transformational or servant leadership (Bass, 1990; Greenleaf, 1970) often fail to resonate with Russia's high power distance, collectivist values, and authoritarian traditions (Hofstede, 1993; House et al., 2013). Applying these models without adaptation leads to ineffective outcomes (Puffer and McCarthy, 2011).

While existing research describes Russian leadership, it primarily focuses on implicit leadership theories—how leaders are perceived by others (for example, Ardichvili and Gasparishvili, 2001; Puffer, 1994) . Few studies explore how leadership functions in practice, what leaders think and do, and how they form their identities (Elenkov, 1998, 2002; Grachev, 2009).

Most research examines leaders from the 1990s and early 2000s (Ardichvili, 2001; Kets de Vries et al., 2004; Puffer, 1995). However, emerging leaders shaped by the socio-economic upheavals of 1985-1998 likely hold different leadership values (Mannheim, 1952; Pilcher, 1994).

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The final published version (version of record) is available online at DOI:10.1177/14705958261421785. Please refer to any applicable publisher terms of use.

Understanding the identity work of this emerging generation is critical. These individuals must navigate a complex interplay between entrenched national leadership prototypes—often grounded in authoritarianism and paternalism—and aspirational global exemplars that emphasize participation, vision, and relational orientation (Guillén, Mayo and Korotov, 2015; Koerner, 2014). This study addresses this theoretical and empirical gap by exploring how emerging Russian leaders negotiate these tensions. In doing so, it reveals how generational shifts and linguistic-conceptual nuances shape leadership identity in hybrid institutional environments. These insights inform the design of leadership development programs that are contextually grounded and culturally adaptive.

Theoretical background

Leadership, Leadership Development, and Leadership Identity

The study of leadership encompasses numerous frameworks aimed at conceptualizing this complex phenomenon. Dinh et al. (2014) identified 40 established leadership theories and 26 emerging ones, reflecting the diversity of approaches to understanding leadership. Despite these efforts, scholars generally agree that leadership involves influencing a group to achieve shared goals (Northouse, 2019). Increasingly, leadership research has moved beyond skills and behaviors to explore leadership identity—a component of self-concept tied to leadership roles (Day and Harrison, 2007). This shift highlights the importance of how individuals perceive themselves as leaders and how these perceptions evolve through social interactions and experiences (Karp and Helgø, 2009; Miscenko, Guenter and Day, 2017).

Leadership identity theory (Day and Harrison, 2007) focuses on the dynamic construction of a leader's identity through experiences and self-reflection. It differs from *social identity theory* (Tajfel and Turner, 2004), which examines how group membership influences self-concept. In leadership contexts, these theories interact, as individuals construct leadership identities by comparing themselves to group prototypes and exemplars (Guillén, Mayo and Korotov, 2015; Lord and Brown, 2001). This interplay is particularly relevant in understanding leadership development across different cultural contexts.

Context-Specific Leadership Development in Russia

In the Russian context, historical legacies of authoritarianism, high power distance, and collectivism influence leadership perceptions (Hofstede, 1993; House et al., 2013). Consequently, Western leadership models, such as transformational leadership (Bass, 1990) and servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1970), often clash with these ingrained cultural norms. Applying these models without adaptation risks inefficacy (Puffer and McCarthy, 2011). As Shekshnia, Puffer and Ledyaeva (2017) point out, Russian leadership is frequently rooted in personalism and control, with informal authority playing a stronger role than institutional frameworks. Effective leadership development in Russia requires programs that consider the unique cultural and socio-political environment (Elenkov, 2002; McCarthy, Puffer and Naumov, 2000). Moreover, the persistence of cultural myths—such as the ideal of the strong, paternalistic leader—further complicates the integration of participative models into the Russian context (Puffer and McCarthy, 2011).

Recent evidence suggests that younger Russian professionals—particularly those exposed to Western business education—are increasingly experimenting with relational and ethical leadership approaches, despite institutional constraints (Shekshnia and Lynton, 2016). This study argues that leadership identity development among emerging Russian leaders is shaped by their efforts to reconcile traditional, authoritarian leadership norms with more modern,

participative approaches (Gill & Negrov, 2021). The dynamic process of identity construction involves self-to-prototype and self-to-exemplar comparisons (Guillén, Mayo and Korotov, 2015; Maurer and London, 2018). Understanding these identity processes is crucial for developing leadership programs that resonate with Russia's evolving business culture.

Leadership Identity and Generational Shifts

Much of the research on Russian leadership is outdated, focusing on leaders from the 1990s and early 2000s (for example, Kets de Vries, 2004; McCarthy, Puffer and Naumov, 2000). This generation was shaped by the socio-economic upheavals of the late 20th century, including perestroika and the 1998 financial crisis (Mannheim, 1952; Pilcher, 1994). Emerging Russian business leaders today, aged 30 to 40, navigate a more complex leadership environment that blends traditional authority with the need for participative and ethical leadership practices (Avolio and Gardner, 2005; Guillén, Mayo and Korotov, 2015). According to McCarthy, Puffer and Satinsky (2019), younger Russian managers increasingly question hierarchical norms and seek to align their leadership with global standards, while still adapting to domestic cultural expectations.

The GLOBE Project (House et al., 2013) offers a comprehensive framework for understanding cross-cultural leadership. For Russia, GLOBE data highlight high scores for autonomy and self-protective leadership, with lower scores for participative and humane-oriented leadership. However, recent research indicates a generational shift toward more relational and participative leadership styles (Gill & Negrov, 2021). These findings echo earlier studies suggesting the emergence of hybrid leadership models that reflect both cultural continuity and global influence (Shekshnia, McCarthy and Puffer, 2007). This study explores how emerging leaders interpret these shifts and develop leadership identities that balance tradition with modern leadership ideals.

This study addresses a gap in Russian leadership research by focusing on how emerging leaders actively construct their identities. Unlike prior research on implicit leadership theories, this study integrates leadership identity theory with cultural. By building on Gill and Negrov (2021), it offers insights for developing context-specific leadership programs that meet the needs of a new generation of Russian leaders.

Method

Research Design and Philosophical Positioning

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the perceptions of leadership among emerging Russian business leaders. The primary method of data collection is semi-structured interviews, which provide a balance of flexibility and structure, allowing for the exploration of key themes while accommodating participants' unique perspectives (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2016). This approach is well-suited for capturing the complexities of leadership identity (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009).

The study is grounded in an interpretivist paradigm, with a relativist ontology and social constructionist epistemology (Light, Berger and Luckmann, 1967). Interpretivism asserts that reality is subjective and shaped by social interactions, making it an appropriate framework for understanding leadership identity as a context-dependent and evolving phenomenon (Finlay, 2012). An abductive research strategy was employed, allowing for an iterative process of refining theoretical constructs based on empirical data (Awuzie and McDermott, 2017). This approach is particularly suitable for exploring dynamic, culturally influenced leadership identities.

Sample Selection and Data Collection

A combination of theoretical and convenience sampling (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) was used to select 30 participants enrolled in a part-time MBA program that held EQUIS accreditation at the time of data collection. The sample size of 30 was chosen in line with qualitative research standards, which suggest this number is sufficient for achieving data saturation and uncovering diverse patterns (Guest, Bunce and Johnson, 2006; Saunders et al., 2018).

Participants came from various industries in the public and private sectors, ensuring a diverse range of leadership experiences. The average age of participants was 32 years, with an average of 7.4 years of leadership experience. One-third of the participants were women, reflecting broader gender dynamics in Russian leadership. Selection criteria focused on individuals with active leadership responsibilities to ensure relevance to the study's objective of exploring leadership identity development.

Table 1 presents anonymised information about the study participants at the moment of interview. Each respondent is identified by a code (e.g., M2, F5), along with their gender, approximate age range at the time of the interview, and their industry sector. This contextual data helps to situate the findings within the professional and demographic diversity of the sample.

Table 1. Demographic and Professional Characteristics of Interview Participants

Code	Gender	Cohort	Industry	Position	Age	Leadership experience, years
M1	Male	Cohort 2	Retail / Publishing / Education	Entrepreneur, ex-CEO	31	7
M2	Male	Cohort 1	Information Technology	Entrepreneur	34	12
M3	Male	Cohort 1	Marketing / Advertising	Director	35	3
M4	Male	Cohort 2	Chemical Industry	Head of Department	34	10
M5	Male	Cohort 2	Retail / Jewelry	CEO of family business	29	5
M6	Male	Cohort 2	Mining	Chief Financial Officer	35	10+
F1	Female	Cohort 1	Legal	Managing Partner, Advocate	32	5+
M7	Male	Cohort 2	Medical / Life Sciences	Director	35	8
F2	Female	Cohort 2	Fashion / Hospitality	Entrepreneur	34	7
F3	Female	Cohort 2	Construction / Engineering	Entrepreneur	34	1
F4	Female	Cohort 2	Film & Media	Entrepreneur, Actress	28	6
M8	Male	Cohort 2	Wholesale Trade	Procurement Manager	36	12
M9	Male	Cohort 2	Logistics / International Trade	Entrepreneur	30	7
F5	Female	Cohort 2	Banking / Financial Services	Manager	31	4
F6	Female	Cohort 1	Management Consulting (Big 3)	Consultant	27	1
F7	Female	Cohort 1	Real Estate	Vice President, Legal	35	8,5
M10	Male	Cohort 1	Biology / Healthcare	Entrepreneur, CEO	34	10
M11	Male	Cohort 1	Energy / Technology	Entrepreneur, Chief Technology Officer	30	7
M12	Male	Cohort 1	Creative Economy / Events Marketing	Entrepreneur	31	13
M13	Male	Cohort 2	Operations / Logistics	Manager	26	6

Code	Gender	Cohort	Industry	Position	Age	Leadership experience, years
M14	Male	Cohort 2	Legal Services	Corporate Lawer / Entrepreneur	37	7
M15	Male	Cohort 2	Information Technology	Entrepreneur / CEO	31	6
M16	Male	Cohort 1	Information Technology	Entrepreneur	31	12
F8	Female	Cohort 1	Energy	Manager	26	4
M17	Male	Cohort 2	Diversified Business / Sport	Entrepreneur, Investor, Sport Executive	30	12
M18	Male	Cohort 1	Information Technology	Entrepreneur, CEO	32	11
F9	Female	Cohort 2	Railway Transport / Asset Management	Partner	26	5
M19	Male	Cohort 1	Diversified Business	Entrepreneur	36	10+
F10	Female	Cohort 2	Oil & Gas / Energy	Manager	32	5
M20	Male	Cohort 2	Corporate Finance	Treasurer	34	10

To preserve cultural nuances and authenticity, interviews were conducted in Russian. The interviews took place between late 2019 and mid-2020, during which two cohorts of MBA graduates were included. One cohort had completed the programme in 2018, and the second had graduated just prior to the interviews, in September 2019. An overview of the interview guide, including key themes and sample questions, is provided in Table 2.

Each interview lasted 45-60 minutes and was conducted in person or via video call, depending on participant availability. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and translated into English by certified translators. The translations were verified by both the author and a second coder to ensure accuracy. Data were managed and analyzed using NVivo software, which facilitated systematic coding and theme identification.

Table 2. Key Themes and Sample Questions from the Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Section	Questions
Introduction	1. In which cohort of MBA are you studying or have been studying, and which stage of the programme are you passing through at the moment? 2. How old are you? 3. How many years of leadership experience do you have?
Leadership in Russia	4. How do you define the word “leadership”? • How would you define a person who you would call “a leader”? 5. How do people become leaders? 6. What factors or events have influenced your understanding of leadership? • When did you have your first leadership experience? • How did these events happen: were they initiated by you, or did they happen by accident? • Any context-related factors? (e.g. relocating to a different city/country?) • Did you have any role models? What was unique about them? 7. Which of these events were the most important in your leadership journey? • Why?

	8. Any significant events/conflicts/failures that shaped your leadership? • How did you react to struggles? 9. How would you describe yourself as a leader today? • Any impact of the MBA programme on this? 10. What kind of a leader would you like to become today? • Do you have any role models? 11. How do you define success? 12. Do you think there are differences in leadership: • Russian leaders vs foreign • Old generation vs young generation • Men vs women
Closing question	13. Is there anything we did not mention but which you would like to add with regard to leadership or your MBA journey?

Data Analysis and Coding Process

Data analysis followed a structured approach that combined thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998) and narrative analysis (Riessman, 1993) enabling the identification of recurring themes and the construction of individual leadership narratives. Transcripts were first read multiple times to achieve a holistic understanding of each participant's narrative, with open coding (Yin, 2016) applied to identify initial themes emerging from both interview questions and spontaneous responses. These key themes were then validated through cross-referencing Russian transcripts with their English translations to ensure culturally specific concepts were accurately represented. NVivo software facilitated consistency and systematic coding throughout this process.

Next, axial coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) grouped related codes into categories based on underlying patterns, linking empirical data to theoretical constructs and refining the understanding of Russian leadership identity. The themes were integrated with existing leadership theories, particularly those focused on leadership identity development (Day and Harrison, 2007) and cross-cultural leadership (Hofstede, 1993; House et al., 2013), ensuring the findings contributed meaningfully to the broader literature. Finally, narratives were constructed to illustrate these themes, supported by participant quotes. These narratives revealed the tension between traditional authoritarian norms and emerging participative leadership styles, offering deeper insights into the evolving leadership identity of Russian business leaders.

Findings

Leadership Identity: The Absence of "Leader" as a Self-Concept

Despite their experience in leadership roles, none of the 30 participants used the term "leader" when responding to the question: "Tell me about yourself briefly. Who are you?" Although they had completed a globally accredited English-speaking MBA program and specialized leadership courses, they identified more readily with occupational roles (e.g., "entrepreneur," "manager"), family roles (e.g., "father," "husband"), or personal interests (e.g., "triathlete," "hiker"). This reluctance to self-identify as leaders reflects the linguistic and cultural context of Russia, where the word "leader" has different connotations or is simply not internalized in everyday discourse (Frimann and Hersted, 2016).

Participants expressed discomfort with the label "leader" despite demonstrating leadership behaviors. For instance, one noted:

"I was asked: 'Are you a leader?' I said… 'Yes.' I just never put it into categories like that – I just worked" (M8).

Some participants even resisted the concept of leadership itself:

"'Leader, leader, leader...' I don't feel it yet. I'm still on my way. I'm just learning" (F8).

This disconnect highlights a gap between formal leadership education and personal identity construction among emerging Russian business leaders.

Key Themes in Leadership Identity

Following the Gioia methodology (Gioia, Corley and Hamilton, 2013), interview data were coded into first-order concepts, second-order themes, and aggregate dimensions. The primary dimensions identified were: *"leadership is about people"* (36 mentions in 19 interviews), *"having a vision and a goal"* (17 mentions in 14 interviews), *"taking responsibility/ownership"* (27 mentions in 12 interviews), and *"having confidence and inner strength"* (20 mentions in 12 interviews). Additional themes included *"authenticity"* (7 mentions), *"delivering results"* (9), *"toughness"* (9), and *"building context"* (5). These findings align with the study's objective of exploring how leadership identity manifests through actions and perceptions among Russian leaders.

Responsibility and Ownership as Core Leadership Traits

The concept of **responsibility/ownership** *("ответственность" or otvetstvennost)* emerged as a central leadership trait. Twelve participants explicitly described leadership as taking responsibility for themselves and others. One entrepreneur summarized:

"Leadership is about taking responsibility" (F2).

Others elaborated on the importance of accountability:

"A leader does not take a victim stance… and is a hundred percent responsible" (M16).

This emphasis on responsibility reflects a cultural shift, as historically, Russian leadership has not strongly emphasized personal accountability (McCarthy, Puffer and Naumov, 2000). One participant connected this trait to historical and societal expectations:

"[A leader has] the role of the father, taking responsibility for society—not out of duty, but from a position of strength and care" (M12).

Confidence and Vision as Pillars of Leadership

Confidence and inner strength were also consistently highlighted. Participants described leaders as having a solid "inner core" (M6) and the ability to inspire through their vision:

"Leadership means seeing the path and having the courage to follow it so that others want to follow you" (M18).

Fourteen participants underscored the importance of having a clear vision and communicating it confidently:

"A leader is a kind of magician who creates an image that people believe in until it materializes" (M19).

Confidence was seen not just as self-assurance, but as a quality that leaders transfer to others:

"Leadership is about transferring this confidence to other people" (M20).

Balancing Human Relations and Results

Emerging Russian leaders emphasized **the need to balance human relations with achieving results**. While traditional Russian management has been characterized as transactional and authoritarian (House et al., 2013; Puffer and McCarthy, 2011), participants valued empathy and relational care:

"Leadership is about recognizing that you can implement ideas through the people around you, and they are ready to follow you" (M6).

Though 12 participants focused on achieving measurable results, half of the respondents stressed the importance of building relationships:

"A leader can make tough decisions, but also cares about people" (M4).

This shift indicates that emerging leaders are integrating relational aspects into their leadership identity, reflecting global trends toward transformational leadership (Bass, 1990; Avolio & Gardner, 2005).

Conflicted Leadership Identity: "Not Like a Traditional Russian Leader"

More than half of the participants distinguished their leadership identity from the traditional Russian leadership archetype, often describing it as authoritarian, rigid, and paternalistic (Elenkov, 1998; Puffer & McCarthy, 2011). They articulated a desire to break from this model:

"In the Russian context, the leader is the pushiest person, often an alpha male" (M18).

Despite this criticism, some participants struggled with applying new leadership behaviors:

"I don't like being controlled, and it is difficult for me to control, but I should give systematic feedback" (M2).

This internal conflict reveals tension between emerging leadership values and deeply ingrained cultural norms.

Generational Shifts Toward Openness and Flexibility

The findings indicate that Russian leadership identity is evolving. Twenty-two participants noted that younger leaders are becoming more open, collaborative, and adaptable:

"The younger generation is less hierarchical. It's about contribution, not rank" (F6).

This shift reflects a broader convergence with Western leadership models (Gill & Negrov, 2021). Leaders are increasingly prioritizing trust, delegation, and work-life balance:

"Trust is becoming very important. Companies that don't trust employees are not modern" (M8).

As recommended by Cloutier and Ravasi (2021), to ensure the trustworthiness of the research, Table 3 summarises the difference in perceptions about leadership in Russia as described in the literature and as described by emerging Russian business leaders.

Table 3. Characteristics of leadership in Russia: comparison.

Characteristics of leadership in Russia as described in the literature	Characteristics of the 'old' generation of Russian leaders as described by emerging Russian business leaders (brackets introduce number of mentions/interviews)	Characteristics of effective leadership as described by emerging Russian business leaders (brackets introduce number of mentions/interviews)
• autonomous and self-protective (Welch, Javidan and House, 2002), • collectivist and having high power distance (Bollinger, 1994; Hofstede, 1980; Naumov and Puffer, 2000; Ralston and Holt, 1996; Ronen and Shenkar, 1985), • authoritarian (Ardichvili, Cardozo and Gasparishvili, 1998; Elenkov, 1998; Saidov, 2014), • autocratic (Puffer and McCarthy, 2011; Suutari, 1998), • authoritative (Kets de Vries, 2001; Kets de Vries and Florent-Treacy, 1999), • centralised (Puffer, 1994), • paternalistic and focused on relations (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 1993), • hierarchical and top-down (Meyer, 2017), • transactional, rather than transformational, leadership model (McCarthy et al., 2008; Puffer and McCarthy, 2011).	• Authoritarian and hierarchical (14/11), • powerful and aggressive (10/7), • strong and rigid (8/6), • paternalistic/supporting (5/3).	• care about people (36/19), • have a vision and a goal (17/14), • take responsibility/ ownership (27/12), • have confidence and inner strengths (20/12), • authentic (7/6), • deliver a result (9/6), • tough (9/5), • build context (5/5).

This dichotomy between the picture of an ideal leader and national archetypes creates anxiety and limits their development — they were hesitant about which pattern to apply to themselves. For example, despite criticising toughness and controlling behaviour, some of them wanted to become more rigid and more controlling:

> *«One of my weaknesses is a lack of control. <…> I don't like being controlled, and it is difficult for me to control; but I should give feedback, systematic feedback. That would be really cool». (M2)*

Based on the above, the study suggests that the journey through the MBA programme was an opportunity for research participants to develop their own leadership identity and seek role models and leadership prototypes.

The study reveals that emerging Russian leaders construct their leadership identity around responsibility, confidence, vision, and relational care, while distancing themselves from traditional authoritarian models. However, tensions remain as they reconcile new leadership ideals with cultural legacies. This generational shift points to a more balanced and participative leadership style, aligning Russia more closely with global leadership trends.

Outliers: bringing more opinions to the discussion

This research does not aim to offer a comprehensive leadership competence model for Russia. Instead, it identifies the most appealing leadership characteristics while acknowledging outliers that challenge a singular definition of leadership. Modern leadership scholarship embraces a

pluralistic approach, arguing for the integration of diverse perspectives rather than imposing a universal leadership archetype (Kezar, 2000). To reflect this, it is essential to highlight responses that diverge from the prevailing discourse among emerging Russian business leaders.

Several participants expressed skepticism about a generational shift in Russian leadership. Two respondents maintained that leadership in Russia remains authoritarian and directive, with no significant change expected:

> *"I think everything we call purely Russian methods—the teams, the bosses—it's all still there. Leadership styles will stay polarized, especially in government sectors" (M7).*

Additionally, seven participants initially defined leadership as a set of innate personal traits, particularly charisma. Charisma was mentioned nine times as essential for inspiring followership:

> *"A leader doesn't necessarily need skills; they have an inner core, charisma, that makes people follow them" (M6).*

Over time, some participants reconsidered this view, suggesting that leadership traits, including charisma, can be developed.

There was also disagreement regarding a leader's inner state. While six participants emphasized authenticity, and twelve highlighted confidence and inner strength, one respondent insisted that leadership stems from inner conflict:

> *"Leaders have the most powerful internal conflict. The gap between where they are and where they want to be fuels their energy and anxiety" (M19).*

Participants' views on the context of Russian leadership also varied. Five respondents described a rough, aggressive environment where assertiveness and resilience are necessary:

> *"In Russia, leadership happens in an aggressive environment where you need to study, push elbows, or be flexible enough to advance" (M6).*

Finally, one participant questioned the presence of genuine leadership among younger generations, attributing this to the economic conditions of the 2000s:

> *"They solve problems in their businesses, but they lack the vision and scale of earlier leaders who operated in a time of greater trust" (M6).*

These divergent views underscore the complexity of leadership in Russia. The integration of multiple perspectives illustrates that leadership identity cannot be captured by a single framework. This aligns with literature advocating for *paradoxical leadership*—the ability to blend different styles to meet diverse challenges (Pearce et al., 2019). Recognizing and accommodating these variations enriches our understanding of Russian leadership and highlights the importance of flexibility in leadership development programs.

Discussion

Redefining Russian leadership identity

The findings reveal that emerging Russian business leaders do not fully internalize the term "leader" as part of their identity. This phenomenon can be traced to the linguistic and cultural context of Russia, where the word "leader" entered common usage only in the past three decades following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Instead, emerging Russian leaders anchor their leadership identity in concepts such as *responsibility, confidence, vision, and relational care*. These findings challenge outdated perceptions that Russian leadership is solely authoritarian, centralized, and transactional (Ardichvili, Cardozo and Gasparishvili, 1998; Elenkov, 1998; Puffer,

1994). Such perceptions can be understood through the lens of what Puffer and McCarthy (2009) term “cultural mythology”—a set of deeply embedded narratives that associate legitimate leadership with strength, control, and paternalism. This mythology continues to shape implicit leadership expectations, including among younger professionals.

However, a generational shift appears to be underway, with 22 participants indicating that leadership practices are becoming more open, collaborative, and trust-oriented. While traditional leadership models in Russia emphasized rigid hierarchies, the emerging paradigm reflects elements of transformational leadership (Bass, 1990) and participative practices (Gill and Negrov, 2021). However, this transformation is not seamless, as many leaders experience tension between the prevailing authoritarian prototype and their desire to adopt more modern, participative approaches. This conflict between self-to-exemplar and self-to-prototype comparisons (Guillén, Mayo and Korotov, 2015) highlights a core identity struggle that shapes their leadership development journey.

These internal tensions mirror broader institutional contradictions in Russia’s leadership ecosystem, as noted by Shekshnia, Puffer and Ledyaeva (2017), who argue that while formal structures promote hierarchical authority, informal influence often governs actual decision-making.

Key Leadership Characteristics in Russia

Emerging Russian leaders ground their identity in four key constructs: confidence, responsibility, vision, and relational care. This challenges conventional views of Russian leadership as primarily authoritarian and centralized (Puffer, 1994; Saidov, 2014) and indicates a generational shift toward more participative and transformational practices.

Confidence: A Cornerstone of Russian Leadership Identity

Confidence emerged as a crucial leadership trait, mentioned by 25 participants. This supports the notion that confidence reflects individuals’ perceived control over their environment and their ability to achieve goals (Mayo et al., 2012). While debates persist on whether confidence predicts leadership emergence (Kolb, 1999), the findings align with trait theory, which positions confidence as a core competency (Northouse, 2019). In contrast to earlier depictions of Russian leaders as domineering or rigid (Elenkov, 1998), this study aligns with findings by Shekshnia (2022), who shows that confidence and resilience were critical success factors among Russian executives navigating the COVID-19 crisis.

Moral responsibility/Ownership: A Culturally Embedded Leadership Trait

Moral responsibility *(«ответственность», otvetstvennost*) was another dominant theme, underscoring a deep-seated cultural expectation for leaders to be accountable for themselves and others. Puffer and McCarthy (2011) highlight that Russian managers often equate responsibility not only with accountability but also with moral obligation—an interpretation rooted in cultural norms and reinforced by Soviet-era narratives of duty and sacrifice.

This expands on traditional Western notions of responsibility to include ownership, duty, obligation, and accountability. Such findings enrich the literature on responsible leadership, which emphasizes leaders’ accountability to a broad range of stakeholders (Doh and Quigley, 2014). The study supports claims that leadership identity is shaped by language (Frimann and Hersted, 2016); the broader meaning of *otvetstvennost* highlights the importance of context-specific interpretations of leadership concepts. This insight challenges the direct application of Western models in Russia and calls for greater linguistic sensitivity in leadership development programs.

Vision and Results Orientation: A Transformational Shift

Fourteen participants highlighted the importance of vision and a clear orientation toward achieving goals, key elements of transformational leadership (Bass, 1990; Northouse, 2019). This finding contradicts the traditional depiction of Russian leadership as predominantly transactional (McCarthy et al., 2008) and supports the idea that Russian leadership styles are converging with Western models (Gill and Negrov, 2021). The results align with the GLOBE Project's findings, which position Russia as moderately high on the Charismatic/Value-Based leadership dimension (House et al., 2013). It also supports recent observations by Shekshnia, Zagieva and Lynton (2020), who argue that even at the board level, Russian leaders increasingly frame their legitimacy through long-term vision and stakeholder engagement. This indicates a potential shift toward transformational practices driven by inspirational motivation and visionary leadership.

While many participants embraced more participative and transformational approaches, some still endorsed traditional authoritarian traits. This suggests that contextual factors like industry and organizational form sustain elements of directive leadership. This nuanced finding indicates the coexistence of transformational and authoritarian styles and calls for further research to explore this duality across different sectors. McCarthy, Puffer and Satinsky (2019) note that state-owned enterprises, in particular, remain resistant to participative change, preserving paternalistic structures that reinforce the old leadership prototype. These findings point to a persistent duality in Russian leadership culture, where emerging styles coexist with entrenched hierarchical norms, warranting further sector-specific investigation..

Relational Care: A Growing Emphasis on People-Centric Leadership

Nineteen participants emphasized the importance of building relationships and demonstrating empathy, signaling a move away from the rigid, non-participative leadership historically associated with Russia (House et al., 2013). This shift reflects what Puffer, McCarthy and Jaeger (2016) described as an emerging preference among younger managers for relational trust and informal leadership influence, especially in hybrid organizational settings.

While Russian leadership culture has been described as "diffuse"—prioritizing relationships before tasks (Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars, 2020)—emerging leaders conceptualize relational care as an emotional bond that enhances follower effectiveness. This aligns with the task-relationship dichotomy in leadership literature (Northouse, 2019) and supports previous research on Russian management culture (Fey, Adaeva and Vitkovskaia, 2001).

The evolving emphasis on relational care reflects a shift toward humanistic and participative leadership, suggesting that traditional cross-cultural frameworks (Hofstede, 1980; House et al., 2013) may no longer accurately represent emerging Russian leadership dynamics. This shift has practical implications for multinational managers and leadership development programs, highlighting the need to adapt leadership practices to reflect these changing values.

The model

Based on the findings, a framework has been developed to summarize the four leadership characteristics that reflect an emerging Russian social leadership identity (Table 4). This framework is structured by two axes: whether a trait or behavior is directed toward the self or others (Day, 2001) and whether it is oriented toward task accomplishment or relationship

building (Northouse, 2019). The framework serves as a valuable guide for the design of leadership development programs that are contextually appropriate for emerging Russian leaders.

Table 4. Four leadership characteristics in Russia as described by emerging Russian business leaders

Orientation	Task	Relations
Self-oriented	**Inner confidence** *("I have the right to lead and I can achieve a result")*	**Taking responsibility/ownership** *("I am responsible for myself, for others and for the organisation")*
Others-oriented	**Inspiring for result** *("I inspire others with a clear vision and dedication for a result")*	**Relational Care** *("I understand other people and care about them")*

To summarise, emerging Russian business leaders believe that a "good" leader in Russia possesses four characteristics.

First, a leader has solid inner confidence or effectively focuses on themselves and on the task ("I have the right to lead, and I can achieve a result"). This correlates with the trait theory of leadership which brings confidence to the core of a leader's personality (Northouse, 2019). Further research is required to unlock such aspects of confidence as self-efficacy, self-respect, self-reliance, self-discipline and others, in relation to Russian leadership identity.

Second, a perceived leader in Russia has a clear vision and inspires followers with it (focus on task and others). This trait corresponds with the Charismatic dimension of the GLOBE Project study (House et al., 2013). According to the GLOBE results, Russia scores "average" on the Charismatic dimension, so this may change as the new generation of leaders comes to the fore. Also, visionary aspects of leadership may indicate that Russian leadership culture is becoming more transformational rather than transactional.

Third, a leader takes responsibility, or ownership over the situation (task/other focus). The literature on responsible leadership may be expanded with specific aspects of responsibility as, in the Russian language, this word had a much broader meaning than in English.

Fourth, a leader in Russia cares about people and builds relations with them (relations/other focus). This contradicts implicit leadership literature that portrays Russian leadership culture as lacking a participative and humane orientation.

In conclusion, the study indicates that Russian leadership culture is becoming more charismatic, transformational, participative, humane-oriented and people-centred and less transactional, authoritarian and directive.

Conflicting identities: self-to-exemplar and self-to-prototype comparison

The study suggests that ymerging Russian leaders experience significant identity tension stemming from conflicting self-to-prototype and self-to-exemplar comparisons (Guillén, Mayo & Korotov, 2015). The traditional leadership prototype—characterized by authoritarianism, paternalism, and centralization—conflicts with the aspirational leadership exemplars who embody vision, relational care, and participative practices. Shekshnia and Lynton (2016) described this tension as "institutional dualism": a paradox in which leaders are expected to demonstrate global competence and modernity while simultaneously navigating environments that reward loyalty, hierarchy, and familiarity with informal power structures. This tension leads

to identity struggles and motivates emerging leaders to seek clarity through leadership development programs (Koerner, 2014). In in transitional environments such as Russia business schools often serve as "identity laboratories", exposing young professionals to competing norms and expectations that must be selectively internalized.

This identity conflict reflects broader societal changes and a gradual transformation of Russia's leadership prototype. However, the persistence of authoritarian traits among certain segments of younger leaders, particularly in state-owned enterprises, suggests that this transformation is uneven. Future research should explore these dynamics further to understand the conditions under which leadership identities evolve.

Theoretical implications

This research provides a critical advancement to cross-cultural management scholarship by deconstructing assumptions about the temporal stability and universality of leadership prototypes. It contributes to the literature in four primary ways:

1. Challenging the Temporal Stability of Implicit Leadership Theories

The study enriches implicit leadership theory by by showing that traditional frameworks, such as Hofstede's dimensions (Hofstede, 1993) and the GLOBE Project's national profiles (House et al., 2013), may no longer accurately reflect the current leadership culture in Russia. While GLOBE data characterize Russia as highly authoritarian, hierarchical, and low on participative and humane dimensions, our findings suggest a significant generational shift toward more transformational, participative, and relational leadership styles. These results align with recent scholarship that identifies hybrid forms of leadership emerging in transitional societies (Puffer, McCarthy and Jaeger, 2016; Shekshnia and Lynton, 2016). This divergence calls into question the temporal stability of cultural leadership dimensions and emphasizes the role of global exposure and generational turnover in reshaping leadership norms (Gill and Negrov, 2021).

2. Conceptual Indigeneity and the Sociolinguistic Gap

A major contribution of this study lies in identifying the sociolinguistic tension in leadership identity construction. As shown in the data, many participants actively avoid the term *leader* (*lider*) due to its ambiguous connotations in the Russian cultural and political context. This underscores the need for indigenous conceptualization in cross-cultural research (Frimann and Hersted, 2016). In particular, we elevate the construct of *otvetstvennost* (moral responsibility, ownership) as a culturally embedded leadership value that blends moral accountability, paternalistic obligation, and task-oriented ownership (Ardichvili and Gasparishvili, 2001; Grachev, 2009). This construct is distinct from Western notions of managerial accountability and signals the importance of integrating culturally and linguistically grounded traits into leadership theory development.

3. Theorizing Hybridization and Identity Work

Using the lens of social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 2004), this research conceptualizes leadership development in Russia not as a linear process of Westernization, but as a dynamic and negotiated hybridization. Emerging leaders experience identity tensions as they navigate self-to-prototype comparisons rooted in traditional authoritarian norms and self-to-exemplar comparisons shaped by global models of vision, empathy, and participation (Guillén, Mayo and Korotov, 2015; Koerner, 2014). This identity liminality reflects what Shekshnia and Lynton (2016) term *institutional duality*—the need to simultaneously project global modernity and conform to localized expectations of authority. Within this context, leadership development programs—particularly in business schools—function as identity laboratories, offering

structured opportunities for reconciling conflicting leadership narratives and experimenting with alternative selves (Day and Harrison, 2007).

4. Path Dependency and Sectoral Heterogeneity

Finally, the study highlights how leadership evolution in Russia is uneven and path-dependent. While many participants articulate aspirational shifts toward participative leadership, others—particularly from state-owned or state-aligned enterprises—continue to endorse directive and paternalistic styles. This confirms findings from earlier studies on leadership in public sector organizations (McCarthy, Puffer and Satinsky, 2019; Shekshnia et al., 2007) and suggests that the coexistence of modern and traditional styles reflects sectoral heterogeneity rather than cultural homogeneity. This challenges simplistic notions of convergence or divergence in global leadership cultures and reinforces the need for more nuanced, context-specific models in cross-cultural leadership theory.

Practical implications

The findings can inform leadership curricula in Russian and international business schools. By integrating context-specific traits such as confidence, responsibility, vision, and relational care, programs can help leaders navigate identity tensions and develop authentic leadership styles. Understanding these leadership traits can help Russian leaders align their self-perception with effective leadership practices. Assessment tools based on this framework can identify development areas and support leaders in overcoming identity struggles. For international executives, particularly those operating in contexts that involve cooperation with Russian partners—whether current or prospective—these findings may offer insights into adapting leadership approaches to improve cross-cultural collaboration. Despite the temporary reduction in the presence of some foreign companies in Russia, commercial ties and business relationships continue in various sectors and are expected to evolve further over time. As global economic interdependence remains a defining feature of international business, understanding local leadership dynamics retains practical significance**.**

Limitations

Given the chosen philosophical position and methodology, the research has several limitations.

First, the selective nature of the MBA program used in this research imposes constraints on the generalizability of the findings. Admission requirements such as English proficiency, leadership experience, and aptitude tests excluded potential participants who may represent different sectors or regions. Consequently, the sample may not capture the full spectrum of emerging Russian business leaders. To enhance the robustness of these findings, future research should include leaders from diverse domains, such as regional politicians, non-governmental organizations, technology entrepreneurs, and public sector managers. Expanding the participant pool would allow for more nuanced insights and facilitate national-level generalizations.

Second, the non-randomized sampling method introduces potential biases. Participants self-selected into the study, which may indicate a higher awareness of leadership concepts compared to the general population. Furthermore, the leadership development program attended by participants may have significantly shaped their perceptions. Many respondents completed their MBA before the study, meaning their views might reflect educational influences rather than pre-existing leadership identities. Future research should employ longitudinal studies to examine how leadership identity evolves before, during, and after leadership education, thereby mitigating this bias.

Third, this study relied exclusively on semi-structured interviews and literature review as data sources. The absence of supplementary empirical data, such as participant observations, reflective essays, or feedback from professors and supervisors, limits the depth of analysis regarding relational and social aspects of leadership identity. Incorporating multiple data sources and triangulation methods (Yin, 2016) in future research could provide a more comprehensive understanding of leadership identity formation. Additionally, including peer evaluations and 360-degree feedback may offer valuable perspectives on how leaders are perceived within their organizations.

Fourth, conducting interviews in Russian and translating them into English poses challenges related to linguistic accuracy and cultural nuances. Although steps were taken to verify translations, some meanings might have been altered or lost. Future studies should consider employing bilingual researchers or utilizing back-translation techniques (Brislin, 1970) to ensure fidelity in interpretation and analysis. This limitation underscores the importance of socio-linguistic research to understand how language shapes leadership identity in different cultural contexts.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that the geopolitical and economic context has changed significantly since the time of data collection (2019–2020), including reduced international business activity in Russia and shifts in cross-border collaboration following the escalation of the situation around Ukraine in 2022. Such changes may influence leadership practices and institutional environments, potentially affecting the applicability of earlier models and frameworks. These contextual factors should be taken into account when interpreting the transferability of the study's conclusions to the current environment.*Future Research Directions*

Future Research Directions

The systemic avoidance of the term "leader" necessitates a deep inquiry into the discursive construction of leadership identity in non-Anglophone settings. Future research should move beyond direct translations of Western terminology to explore how indigenous metaphors and linguistic nuances influence role internalization. This is critical for developing context-specific leadership programs that resonate with local cognitive frameworks rather than relying on imported semantics.

The proposed four-dimensional framework—comprising confidence, responsibility, vision, and relational care—requires validation through large-scale quantitative studies involving leaders from various industries and regions. Testing this model in diverse transitional and developed economies will clarify which traits are uniquely ingenious to Russia and which are globally applicable, thereby refining global leadership theories.

The identified shift toward participative and humane-oriented leadership warrants a closer examination of how younger leaders navigate the clash between traditional authoritarian norms and modern practices. Comparative generational studies should pinpoint specific elements of Russian leadership culture that remain static versus those susceptible to rapid erosion, offering a clearer view of cultural evolution.

The shifting geopolitical and economic context serves as a "natural experiment" to observe how leadership identities adapt to extreme institutional decoupling and shifting international exposure. Future scholarship should explore whether such pressures reinforce traditional, "self-protective" models or catalyze new forms of hybrid agency. Additionally, investigating the intersection of external perceptions and internal identity formation remains vital for understanding the tensions inherent in global-local leadership roles.

Finally, adopting longitudinal research designs is essential to track the evolution of leadership identity from its inception in business schools to its manifestation in professional practice. This approach will reveal how socio-cultural changes and professional experiences interact to shape identity work and help leaders reconcile persistent identity tensions.

Conclusions

This study deconstructs monolithic depictions of Russian leadership by theorizing a generational shift in leadership identity. We propose a hybrid model anchored in confidence, relational care, result-driven inspiration, and the indigenous construct of otvetstvennost (responsibility, ownership), demonstrating that emerging leaders synthesize transformational practices with deeply rooted cultural obligations. A critical contribution is the identification of a sociolinguistic gap: the persistent reluctance to self-identify as a "leader" reveals an ongoing struggle between entrenched national prototypes and global exemplars. Ultimately, this research positions leadership development programs in transitional economies as an "identity laboratory". The research advocates for a paradigmatic shift in cross-cultural management, advocating for a move toward linguistically-grounded and institutionally-sensitive frameworks that capture the dynamic, hybrid nature of leadership in a globalized world.

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2026-12-31
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https://doi.org/10.1177/14705958261421785
Shapenko A, Dickmann M, Horwitz F. (2026) “We are not like them”. The generational shift in leadership perceptions in an emerging market. International Journal of Cross Cultural Management, Available online 5 February 2026

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