

### *Main Article*

# Democratisation in Russian Politics and the 1994 Russian Invasion of Chechnya

Michael Keen

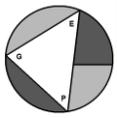
## Introduction

In December 1994, soldiers of the Russian Federation crossed the border separating Russia from Chechnya, *de jure* an autonomous republic in the North Caucasus region within Russia but *de facto* independent since 1991, beginning what subsequently became known as the First Chechen War. Russian forces immediately met with heavy Chechen resistance, and fighting continued until Russian forces in Chechnya were defeated militarily in 1996, at horrific cost to both militaries and to the civilian population of Chechnya.

The Russian invasion of Chechnya was not undertaken for primarily military reasons, however. Instead, as this paper argues, the 1994 invasion of Chechnya was inseparably tied to Russia's incomplete process of democratisation following the fall of the Soviet Union.

While Russia was no longer democratising in the period leading up to the 1994 invasion of Chechnya, its prior partial democratisation was critical in shaping both the decision of President Boris Yeltsin and his inner circle to commit to a path of invasion and the manner in which this decision was made.

Specifically, Yeltsin's advisors pushing for war did so because they



hoped a successful campaign would improve their standing vis-à-vis their rivals in Yeltsin's entourage, and Yeltsin's decision to commit to war came with one eye on the results of the 1993 parliamentary elections and the other looking ahead to the 1996 presidential elections.

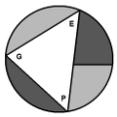
The speed, opacity, and confusion surrounding the decision to launch the invasion was a product of the institutional failures of the 1993 Constitution. The failure of the 1994 Russian invasion of Chechnya led in turn to the further erosion of Russian democracy by exposing and entrenching the non-consultative nature of Russian politics, undermining civil liberties in Russia, and providing ideological ammunition for the subsequent rising authoritarianism of Vladimir Putin.

### Assessing Democratisation in Russia

In considering the relationship of democratisation in Russia with the start of the 1994 Russian military campaign in Chechnya, it is first necessary to delve deeper into precisely what democratisation entails and how the concept maps onto the realities of Russia in 1994.

As Bogaards (2010: 476) points out, democratisation has been defined and measured in many different ways, and applying these varying definitions results in quite different assessments of which countries are and are not democratic or democratising at any given time.

However, as Tilly writes, there are three main ways to assess democratisation: substantive criteria, which sthe realities of individual experience and social interactions; constitutional criteria,

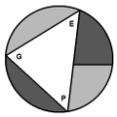


which emphasise legal procedures and institutions; and political-process criteria, which emphasise interactions between political actors (Tilly 2000: 4).

Although a full analysis of these three methods of assessing democratisation is beyond the scope of this paper, Tilly's argument in favor of political-process criteria is compelling, and this paper will adopt Tilly's definition of democracy. Per Tilly, "a regime is democratic insofar as it maintains broad citizenship, equal citizenship, binding consultation of citizens at large with respect to governmental activities and personnel, as well as protection of citizens from arbitrary action by governmental agents" (Tilly 2000: 6). A regime is thus becoming more democratic, or democratising, if it is advancing, on net, these four criteria.

By applying Tilly's definition, it is clear that Yeltsin's Russia of 1994 was more democratic than the Soviet Union had been and therefore that Russia had experienced democratisation at some point and to some degree between 1991 and 1994. However, whether Russia was still democratising in 1994, and to what degree, is much more contestable.

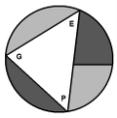
The key event in Russian democratisation between the dissolution of the USSR and the 1994 invasion of Chechnya was the constitutional crisis of 1993, which pitted President Yeltsin and his inner circle against opposition in the Supreme Soviet of the Russian Federation, Russia's parliament. Although the dispute initially concerned Yeltsin's economic reforms meant to reorient Russia's economy towards capitalism, it soon became a fight over the fundamental balance of power between the presidency and the parliament in post-Soviet Russia.



A national referendum in April 1993 assessing popular confidence in President Boris Yeltsin and calling for early presidential and parliamentary elections failed to resolve the standoff, and in September 1993, the crisis reached its apex. President Yeltsin ordered the parliament dissolved, despite having no powers to do so under the 1978 Constitution, then still in effect. Parliament responded by formally impeaching Yeltsin and declaring Vice President Alexander Rutskoy, who happened to be a major Yeltsin opponent, to be Acting President. After escalating street battles in Moscow between pro-Yeltsin and anti-Yeltsin forces, the constitutional crisis was only resolved when the Russian army, previously neutral, decisively threw in its lot with Yeltsin. After a tank bombardment (see Photo 1), the parliament building was stormed, and the recalcitrant deputies were forced into submission.



Photo 1: Russia's parliament building after being shelled by pro-Yeltsin army units, October 4, 1993 (Foltynova 2019)



Based on Tilly's definition, the 1993 constitutional crisis brought Russia's democratisation to at least a temporary halt: one elected branch of government bombarding another into submission does not advance Tilly's political-process criterion of effective binding consultation, nor does the fact that the political dispute was effectively resolved by the army taking sides with one governing branch of the country.

### Domestic Russian Politics and the Prelude to Invasion

In December 1993, a popular referendum approved a new constitution favored by President Yeltsin. The 1993 Constitution concentrated enormous formal power in the hands of the president, granting the president the power to appoint key ministers and even go to war without consulting the parliament (McFaul 2001: 213-214). The institutional design of the 1993 Constitution would greatly influence the Russian leadership's decision to invade Chechnya in December 1994.

One final national political event on December 12, 1993 had a major impact on Russian-Chechen relations and, ultimately, the outbreak of full-scale war. Simultaneously with the constitutional referendum, new parliamentary elections were held. Although Yeltsin himself was not a member of any political party, several liberal parties, most notably Russia's Choice, were understood to be pro-government parties.

As shown in Figure 1, these parties performed disappointingly in the elections, while the party that garnered the largest share of votes was the right-wing nationalist Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR), led by Vladimir Zhirinovskiy (see Figure 1) (Kagarlitsky 2002: 84).

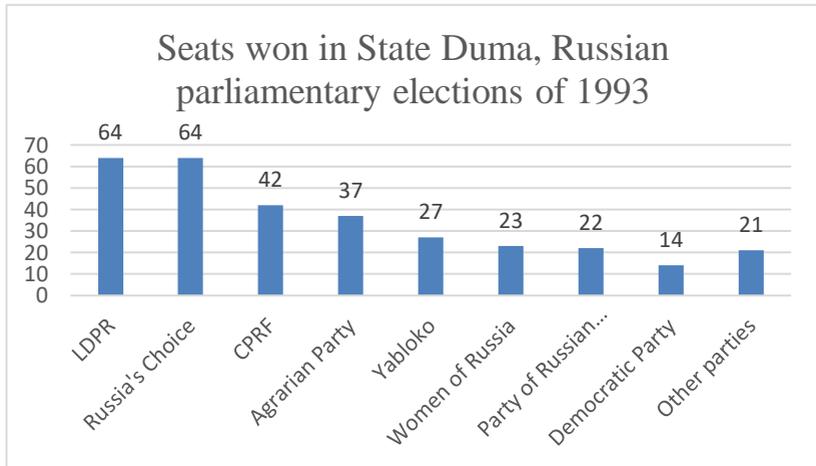
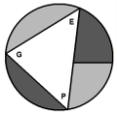
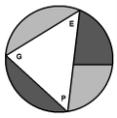


Figure 1: results of parliamentary elections, December 12, 1993

The LDPR advocated a muscular form of Russian nationalism bordering on fascism, emphasising rebuilding Russia as a great power and a unique civilisation. The LDPR's rise seemed to indicate that conservative nationalism was set to become a dominant ideology of the opposition in Russia. Thus Yeltsin's inner circle began to think about how the president could undercut the LDPR's appeal going forward to prevent Zhirinovskiy making a strong future challenge for the presidency. They soon came up with an answer: a decisive strike against Chechnya (Gall & De Waal 1997: 144).

In 1991, as the Soviet Union collapsed, Chechnya, formerly (together with Ingushetia) an Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic within the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (SFSR), declared its independence from Russia.



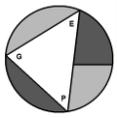
Prior to the collapse of the USSR, the Chechen nationalist movement received encouragement from Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, who raised fears of the Russian nationalist movement crushing non-Russians within the Russian SFSR as a means of making trouble for Boris Yeltsin, who was encouraging non-Russian union republics (for example, the modern states of the Baltics, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia) to secede from the Soviet Union (Cheterian 2008: 227; Seely 2001: 16).

For their parts, President Yeltsin and the Russian leadership always opposed Chechnya's independence. But between the breakup of the USSR and 1994, Russia's central government was too preoccupied with other matters (especially reforming the economy and internal power struggles) to prevent Chechnya from achieving *de facto* independence.

However, the Russian state's impotence did not prevent growing hostility between Yeltsin's government and Chechnya's separatist regime of Dzhokhar Dudayev, a former Soviet air force general who had been elected chairman of the National Congress of the Chechen People in late 1990 and President of Chechnya in October 1991 (Zakayev 2018: 20-22). Yeltsin and Dudayev soon developed an immense personal enmity for each other.

From 1992 onward, the central Russian government consistently sought to overthrow Dudayev's regime by force, even if before 1994 the central government lacked the resources to act effectively against Dudayev (Evangelista 2002: 22).

In Chechnya, despite little interference from the central government for three years, Dudayev was unable to build a functioning state. Rule of law

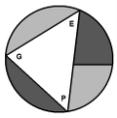


was tenuous at best; as a result, according to one estimate, up to 10,000 people were killed or disappeared in Chechnya between 1991 and 1994 (Winter 2016: 15-16). The Chechen economy largely consisted of various crime rackets. Many of these crime rackets spanned the Russian-Chechen border (which, prior to 1994, was never closed in any case); members of the Russian elite often laundered their ill-gotten money in Chechnya (Kagarlitsky 2002: 113).

By 1994, though, the stage was set for a greater confrontation between the central Russian government and Dudayev's regime. First and foremost, President Yeltsin had defeated his opponents in Moscow and was therefore finally in a position to address Chechnya. Other developments furthered the rising confrontation. In February 1994, the autonomous Russian republic of Tatarstan signed an agreement with the central government under which Tatarstan, which like Chechnya had made moves towards independence and declared "state sovereignty," agreed to renounce its claims to sovereignty in exchange for various special concessions and rights (Cheterian 2008: 249-250). Crucially, with Tatarstan's status vis-à-vis Moscow clarified and formalised, Chechnya stood as the only remaining region of Russia contesting its relationship with the center.

Through spring 1994, both sides remained committed, on paper at least, to negotiations. Dudayev demanded a meeting with Yeltsin himself; Yeltsin was formally open to the idea, and a Kremlin representative announced in March that preparations for a Russian-Chechen "summit" were underway (Cheterian 2008: 250).

However, the Russian government, after months of delay, nominated

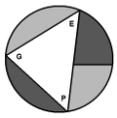


Nationalities Minister Sergei Shakhrai to head its negotiating team. Dudayev's hatred for Shakhrai was well known; Dudayev had called Shakhrai an "enemy of the Chechen people" and accused him of instigating conflict between Ingush and Ossets in 1992 (Bennett 1998: 313-314).

In late May 1994, a car bomb in Grozny, the capital of Chechnya, targeted Dudayev's convoy. Dudayev escaped unscathed, but three others were killed, including a Chechen government minister. The Chechen government promptly blamed Russian intelligence for the attack, and in an interview with a Russian television station, Dudayev personally attacked Yeltsin, accusing him of being a drunkard (Cheterian 2008: 251). Shakhrai later claimed these personal insults ended any possibility of a direct meeting between Dudayev and Yeltsin that could have averted war (Ibid: 251). Negotiations having failed, Yeltsin and his inner circle increasingly turned towards military options.

However, through summer and early fall 1994, military options did not stretch to full-scale invasion, and Yeltsin's inner circle was by no means united. In July, a number of Russian vehicles were hijacked by Chechen criminals, who attempted to flee with hostages and ransom money to Chechnya; the fact that the hijackers were promptly apprehended by Dudayev's security forces did not prevent the hijackings from causing, according to one analysis, "a conclusive and disastrous deterioration of relations between the Kremlin and Dudayev" (Lieven 1998: 87).

Immediately following the hijackings, Yeltsin's government increased its financial support for the Chechen Provisional Council, an anti-Dudayev Chechen group led by Umar Avturkhanov, which announced



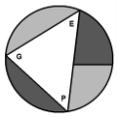
in early August it was forming a parallel government in Chechnya to rival Dudayev's (Bennett 1998: 318).

Also in August, Ruslan Khasbulatov, former speaker of Russia's Supreme Soviet and one of Yeltsin's most prominent political opponents during the 1993 constitutional crisis and an ethnic Chechen, announced he was permanently returning to Chechnya. Khasbulatov claimed he would work to make peace between rival Chechen factions but undoubtedly sought to present himself as an alternative to Dudayev (Bennett 1998: 319).

According Akhmed Zakaev, then an official in Dudayev's government, Khasbulatov had been seeking to sow opposition to Dudayev's government in Chechnya since shortly after Dudayev's election in October 1991, including by working to torpedo any possible meeting between Dudayev and Yeltsin; but Khasbulatov's physical arrival in Chechnya marked a new escalation (Zakayev 2018: 33-34).

Despite his opposition to Dudayev, Khasbulatov enjoyed great prestige in Chechnya thanks to his past experience and achievements in Russian national politics. Khasbulatov's return to Chechnya alarmed Yeltsin and his inner circle even further: they feared their hated rival could use Chechen politics as a springboard to return to the national political scene (Shevtsova 1999: 114).

Plans to marginalise both Dudayev and Khasbulatov by supporting Avturkhanov's Chechen Provisional Council accelerated. On August 25, 1994, Yeltsin's government recognised the Chechen Provisional Council as the sole legitimate government of Chechnya. By October, Russian air

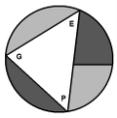


forces were supporting the Chechen Provisional Council in its skirmishes with pro-Dudayev forces; still, the latter consistently came out on top in the clashes (Lieven 1998: 89-91). In early November, Yeltsin's government announced that talks with Chechnya could only occur after Dudayev left power (Lieven 1998: 92).

Meanwhile, Yeltsin's pro-war advisors grew in influence within his entourage, partially for reasons having nothing to do with Chechnya. At the end of August 1994, President Yeltsin's drunken conduct on a state visit to Germany prompted several liberal members of the government to write Yeltsin a letter asking him to behave with more dignity; in response, Yeltsin marginalised them from the government (Gall & De Waal 1997: 154).

In October, an economic crash weakened the position of Prime Minister Chernomyrdin, who had not enthusiastically supported war, while in early November, two more moderate ministers were sacked (Gall & De Waal 1997: 155). Hardliners now controlled ever more access to Yeltsin himself. Their motivations for war continued to be mixed.

In November, Oleg Lobov, secretary of the Security Council, reportedly called for a "short, victorious war to raise the President's ratings" (quoted in Evangelista 2002: 38). Lobov had in mind the operation the United States had carried out in Haiti that September, which appeared to provide a popularity surge for U.S. President Bill Clinton; the military action against the Russian parliament in 1993 was also cited as an encouraging precedent for a war in Chechnya (Isaenko & Petschauer 2000: 13).

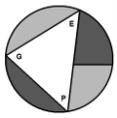


Lobov may have not even understood the extent to which the situation in Chechnya was not analogous to Haiti or the Russian parliament; Yeltsin's advisors, especially the hardliners, were remarkably uninformed about what was actually happening in Chechnya (Evangelista 2002: 36). Defense Minister Pavel Grachev subsequently claimed that Dudayev could be removed by a single Russian airborne battalion in two hours, and Grachev reportedly told Yeltsin any operation against Chechnya would be "a piece of cake" (quoted in Shevtsova 1999: 113).

In late November 1994, the Russian government attempted to give the ineffective Chechen Provisional Council more direct support. On November 26, a column of the Provisional Council's fighters launched a major assault on Grozny, with the support of dozens of Russian tanks and armored vehicles, manned by Russian soldiers (Lieven 1998: 92).

After heavy fighting, the assault was routed by pro-Dudayev forces, who captured 21 Russian soldiers. Dudayev paraded the prisoners on television, claiming that if Russia admitted they were its troops, the men would be treated as prisoners of war and, if not, they would be executed as mercenaries (Bennett 1998: 325-326). Yeltsin responded with an ultimatum, demanding that all forces in Chechnya release their prisoners and disarm (Lieven 1998: 92).

Three days later, on November 29, Yeltsin called a meeting of the Security Council. At the meeting, Yeltsin demanded an immediate vote in favour of war, refusing to permit any discussion until after the vote was passed unanimously (Bennett 1998: 326).



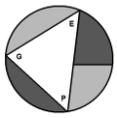
At this point, it was clear to all that war was imminent. Sporadic Russian airstrikes on Grozny began and Khasbulatov, seeing where events were headed, left Chechnya on December 4; Dudayev's release of the captured Russian soldiers on December 6 proved futile, and Chechen armed forces mobilised (Lieven 1998: 93). On December 7, the Russian government claimed the conflict did not concern Russia and Chechnya but was only a "peacemaking mission" to separate warring Chechen "factions," thereby casting the conflict as merely a matter of restoring order and denying the existence of any political dimension (Kipp 2001: 53). On December 11, Russian military columns crossed the border into Chechnya, and war began.

### Incomplete Democratisation as Catalyst for War

The decision to invade Chechnya made in fall 1994 would not have been possible without Russia's incomplete democratisation. Had Russia not democratised at all, there would have been much less pressure to raise President Yeltsin's ratings specifically in advance of the 1996 elections.

Despite the fact that the 1996 presidential election, like other elections in post-Soviet Russia, was marred by widespread allegations of voting irregularities, to say nothing of the unfair media environment in support of President Yeltsin, it was democratic in one critical aspect: Yeltsin and his aides understood that it was at least theoretically possible for Yeltsin to lose the election and to be removed from power as a result.

Although authoritarian regimes that do not face electoral pressure do frequently start internal and external wars in order to boost domestic

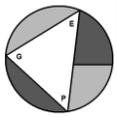


popularity, the specific time constraint imposed by the 1996 elections added special urgency to hardliners' preferred Chechnya policies, contributing to the decision to invade.

Moreover, the increasingly hardline shift in the Yeltsin government's Chechnya policy occurred partially in response to the apparent growing popularity of the nationalist wing of Russian politics. If the 1993 parliamentary elections had not been relatively free and fair, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy's LDPR would not have been able to score a surprise win, thereby signaling the arrival of the nationalist bloc as a force to be reckoned with.

However, the fact that democratization in Russia had been halted also provided political motivations for the military campaign against Chechnya. Because Yeltsin had crushed his political opponents with military force and pushed through a hyper-presidential constitution, despite the presence of opposing parties in the Duma, Yeltsin no longer faced any real domestic political opposition by 1994. This left him unable to resort to his preferred political tactic of blaming the opposition for Russia's problems, most notably the perilous state of the economy and declining living standards (Shevtsova 1999: 114). A new solution, or excuse, was needed, and the Chechen war was intended to provide one.

In addition to impacting motivations behind Russia's military campaign in Chechnya, the incomplete state of democratisation in Russian politics also impacted the mechanisms by which the decision to invade Chechnya was reached. The institutional design of the 1993 Russian Constitution, imposed after the 1993 crisis, and in particular the

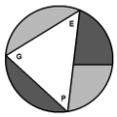


constitution's extreme concentration of power in the hands of the president, shaped the Russian government's decision-making process on the road to war. Four factors characterised this presidential system:

First, the super-presidential system exposed the entire process to President Yeltsin's personal foibles. For example, as was previously discussed, several leading liberals in Yeltsin's inner circle, who advocated a more cautious line on Chechnya, were marginalized in early fall 1994 because Yeltsin was personally offended by their request that he behave with more dignity when representing Russia abroad.

Furthermore, Yeltsin's personal hatred for Ruslan Khasbulatov, which matched Yeltsin's hatred for Dudayev, pushed the Russian government to intervene more aggressively against Dudayev's regime lest Khasbulatov gain influence in the interim (Bennett 1998: 320). Had Russia's democratic institutions been stronger and its political actors not been fundamentally subservient to Yeltsin, Yeltsin's personality would not have played such an outsize role and the Russian government would have been more likely to back Khasbulatov as, on merits alone, Khasbulatov was likely the Chechen opposition figure best placed to topple Dudayev without war due to Khasbulatov's national prestige and links to influential religious orders in Chechnya (Zakaev 2018: 23).

Second, Yeltsin's vast powers as President meant that influence within Yeltsin's inner circle frequently did not correspond with formal job titles but rather with personal access to Yeltsin, a hallmark of patrimonial authoritarian regimes rather than fully democratic ones. For instance, the struggle for influence within Yeltsin's inner circle was the main factor initially pushing hardliners to advocate a military solution in

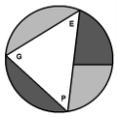


Chechnya as early as summer 1994; then, the main advocates of war were those who had been marginalised by recent cabinet reshuffles and sought to regain lost power (Lieven 1998: 86).

In another example, after November 26, Defense Minister Pavel Grachev decisively backed the use of force, likely in an attempt to seize the limelight from his more hesitant political rivals (Gall & De Waal 1997: 163). Fights over personal access to Yeltsin also led members of his inner circle to prevent others from reaching Yeltsin with information, which might have swayed Yeltsin's determination away from war (Ibid.: 165).

Third, the formal powers vested in the presidency meant that President Yeltsin was able to formally authorize the military campaign via secret decree; he was under no constitutional obligation to inform, much less consult, the Russian parliament or broader public (Evangelista 2002: 32). Under a more democratic institutional system, the fact that as of December 1994, polls found that a greater share of the Russian public opposed military action against Chechnya than supported it might have been more relevant in guiding the Russian government's policy (Cheterian 2008: 259).

Finally, the 1993 Constitution left an institutional hole in decision-making: no single body existed to pull together information from different ministries, chains of command and factions in the leader's inner circle into one single coherent policy. During the Soviet era, the Politburo had fulfilled this role. In 1994, the closest such institution was the Security Council, but even it did not fully function (Lieven 1998: 95-96). As a result, the process by which the decision to launch a military campaign in Chechnya was opaque even to those participating in it, and



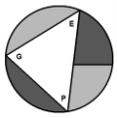
major technical concerns expressed by the Russian military were ignored (Lieven 1998: 88-89).

### Conclusion: The Invasion of Chechnya and the Future of Russian Democracy

The 1994 Russian military campaign in Chechnya was, in retrospect, corrosive to democratisation in Russian politics. Theoretically, leaving aside the fact that the Chechen victims of the war were nominally Russian citizens, the war need not have been destructive to Russian democratisation. The campaign was formally justified in terms of restoring constitutional order to the last region of the Russian Federation whose relationship with the center remained contested.

Tilly acknowledges that for a state to democratise, it must actually have the capacity to govern, which includes control over its territory (Tilly 2000: 6). However, that is not how things occurred in practice. First, Russia lost the war militarily, and a peace agreement signed in 1996 left Chechnya even further outside the control of Moscow than had been the case in 1994. More importantly, the war ultimately reinforced rather than challenged the forces that ground democratisation in Russia to a halt prior to the start of the war.

The war demonstrated beyond all doubt the lack of popular consultation involved in the running of the Russian state: President Yeltsin was able to start, prosecute, and ultimately lose a war without consulting the broader government, much less the public, or subsequently facing any real accountability (Blank & Tilford 1995: 3).



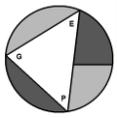
Although opposition to the war within Russia emerged almost immediately, especially from within the Russian military, and was taken up by political parties, the war did not prompt a new repolarization of Russian politics that could have challenged the system more broadly (McFaul 2001: 258). This was largely because the political forces that opposed the invasion of Chechnya did not match the forces opposing Yeltsin's other policies, preventing the formation of a united opposition front (Ibid: 259-260).

Despite the war's unpopularity in Russia, President Yeltsin was reelected in 1996, his victory owing more to private deals cut with major political and economic figures than to genuine popularity or new policies.

Ultimately, the fact that the post-1993 institutional structure, with all its undemocratic patrimonialism, opacity, and lack of popular accountability, was able to survive the political crises that followed the 1994 invasion of Chechnya demonstrated the post-1993 institutional structure's staying power and made further democratisation more difficult (McFaul 2001: 262-264).

After 2000, Yeltsin's successor, Vladimir Putin, was able to channel political ideas on Russia's "crisis of statehood" that emerged in the context of the 1994 invasion of Chechnya into a new loose ideology of "Putinism" (Hill & Gaddy 2013: 38). Putin was then able to dismantle many aspects of Russian democracy without meaningfully departing from the Yeltsin-era rules of the game.

Finally, the Russian leadership drew lessons from the military progress

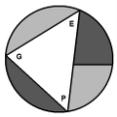


of the 1994 invasion of Chechnya that would later erode democracy in Russia. For example, the Russian media quickly proved itself an irritant to the government over Chechnya by reporting honestly on military defeats suffered and atrocities committed by Russian forces, and by refusing to toe the government's line in portraying the Chechen leaders as simple criminals and fanatics. When Russia invaded Chechnya again in late 1999, the government made control over media narratives of the war a priority, which contributed to a broader increase in government repression of the independent media in Russia (Zürcher 2007: 94). Russian democracy suffered as a result.

There is no evidence that President Yeltsin and his advisors launched the 1994 military campaign in Chechnya with the primary intention of striking a blow at the process of democratisation in Russian politics. Instead, as has been the case with countless military campaigns, different political actors supported war in Chechnya to advance myriad ends.

However, Russia's journey on the spectrum between authoritarianism and democracy between 1991 and 1994, and especially the specific point at which democratisation was halted, was instrumental in shaping the personal and political motivations and the institutional processes that led those in favour of war with Chechnya to win out in shaping Russian policy. The war itself then further calcified Russia's democratic halt and even paved the way for greater authoritarianism under President Putin. The ultimate victims were the people of Russia and Chechnya.

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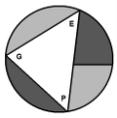
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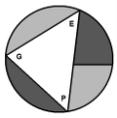
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