

DEMOCRATIZATION AND WAR: THE CHECHEN WARS' CONTRIBUTION TO FAILING DEMOCRATIZATION IN RUSSIA

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Abstract: This article extends Edward Mansfield and Jack Snyder's proposition that regimes in the process of democratization are more likely to engage in international conflict. First, the article expands the theory to include civil war by looking at Russia's internal clashes with Chechnya. Second, the analysis demonstrates the existence of a vicious circle in which the process of democratization led to military adventures, which in turn reduced the level of democracy in Russia. While many explanations have been advanced for the Chechen wars, this article focuses on elite competition, the role of the military, the loss of great power status, and the need to identify an external enemy in order to promote internal consolidation as determining factors.

This article argues that the effect of the two Chechen wars, 1994-1996 and 1999-2002, has been devastating to the Russian democratization process. Both wars were the product of a regime moving from authoritarian to more democratic government but, the wars themselves helped block Russia's democratic transition and reinforced the semi-authoritarian nature of the state.

This argument proceeds using the framework of the theory about democratization and war developed by Edward Mansfield and Jack Snyder. The article analyzes how this theory and its implications fit Russia's case,

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and whether the case of Russia and particularly Russia's wars in Chechnya support the theory. In addition, the article extends the original Mansfield and Snyder analysis by showing how the wars slowed the democratization process.

The article only examines the case of Russia through empirical observations and does not touch upon the methodology that has been used by Mansfield and Snyder and others to find statistical evidence for the theory. The two Chechen wars are examined and some conclusions are drawn from them, as to how small but continuous wars have both been the product of elite competition under conditions of partial democratization, and have undermined Russia's democratization process. The article thus extends the analysis of the problem identified by the theory by showing how, in the Russian case, war is not just a product of incomplete democratization, but itself contributes to weakening democratization. Thus, under some circumstances, there may be a vicious circle whereby incomplete democratization makes war more likely, but war then slows down or reverses democratization, making further wars a strong possibility. While this article does not discuss the Russia-Georgia war of 2008 or Russian military action in Ukraine in 2014, the analysis suggests that these conflicts may have been linked to the earlier Chechen wars.

Democratization and War

Since at least 1994 the Kantian proposition that democratic countries do not fight each other has been under scrutiny by academics and analysts. Although it is not a new notion, this idea has been incorporated more into the Western world's foreign policy doctrines since the end of the Cold War and has greatly affected how countries become involved in the politics of other countries. Mansfield and Snyder's starting point was that before full democracy is achieved, there is a process of democratization.¹ Their theory has elicited a lot of responses and has also resulted in a book, *Electing to Fight - Why Emerging Democracies Go to War*, 10 years after the first two articles were first published.²

The central argument in this theory is that countries experiencing the process of democratization are more war prone, especially when their domestic institutions are too weak to effectively regulate increases in mass political participation that accompany democratic transition. This central argument has been continuously argued by Mansfield and Snyder for over a decade, even if some critics have claimed that regimes that begin to

¹ Edward Mansfield and Jack Snyder. 1995. "Democratization and War," *Foreign Affairs*, 74 (3), 79-97; Edward Mansfield and Jack Snyder. 1995. "Democratization and the Danger of War," *International Security*, 20 (1), 5-38.

² Mansfield and Snyder. 2005. *Electing to Fight: Why Emerging Democracies go to War*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.

move toward or away from greater democracy do not necessarily possess a short-term window of heightened vulnerability to war participation, and so regime change and war involvement are independent of one another.³

The theory does support the notion that mature democracies are less likely to go to war against each other, if they ever do. The theory focuses on great powers, although it also involves research on the cases of smaller countries. Mansfield and Snyder argue that “The pattern of the democratizing great power suggests that the problem lies in the nature of domestic political competition after the breakup of the autocratic regime.”⁴ The two significant great powers in world politics that are still in the process of democratization are Russia and, to some extent, China. This was evident in the 1990s and during the 2000s as well: “Pushing nuclear-armed great powers like Russia or China towards democratization is like spinning a roulette wheel: many outcomes are undesirable.”⁵ In Russia’s case the democratization attempt that began in the early 1990s resulted not in an interstate war, but a civil war, which then in turn had a devastating impact on the development of the Russian political system and the use of power.

Post-Soviet Russia can be compared in interesting ways to the democratization process of Bismarck’s Germany in 1870-1914 and Japan in the 1920s. Both of these cases experienced a democratization process that first resulted in the defeat of the liberals, the rise of nationalism, and war. The old elite was mostly based on security structures and used nationalist rhetoric to gain back power.

This belligerent nationalism is likely to arise for two reasons. First, political leaders try to use nationalism as an ideological motivator to spur greater national cohesion in the absence of effective political institutions.⁶ Both old and new elites share this incentive to play the nationalist card. The second reason is that new political opportunities and underdeveloped institutions provide extra incentives and opportunities for elite competition.

In Russia the political elite that dominated the democratization process in the early 1990s did not gain sufficiently wide support through deploying the rhetoric of democracy. They also needed great power nationalism which will be discussed in greater detail later in this article. For Russia to break away from the authoritarian traditions in its political system, it needed to experience an even greater weakening of the state and a total loss of great power status, as happened in the case of Japan and Germany after WWII, before regaining international status on new terms

³ William R. Thompson and Richard Tucker. 1997. “A Tale of Two Democratic Peace Critiques,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 41 (3), 450.

⁴ Mansfield and Snyder, “Democratization and the Danger of War,” 7.

⁵ Mansfield and Snyder, “Democratization and War,” 80.

⁶ Edward D. Mansfield and Jack Snyder. 2002. “Democratic Transitions, Institutional Strength and War,” *International Organizations*, 56 (2), 299.

and with a new political system. Those who oversaw the fall of the Soviet Union were not prepared to let their power go. Instead, they consolidated power in post-Soviet Russia with the help of the Chechen wars and through non-democratic means.

Democratization in Russia

When the Russian Federation became a new country in 1991, it inherited a double legacy that included both the Soviet and Russian imperial pasts. At the beginning of its existence, it simultaneously was undergoing geographical adjustments and embarking on the development of a market economy at the same time as political regime change occurred. This change was widely characterized as a transition from the authoritarian rule of the one-party Communist state towards a democracy with free elections, a multi-party system, and the stable institutions associated with Western democracies.

During the first two years after the break-up of the Soviet Union and the initial period of democratization, Russia's leaders attempted to come up with a new form of foreign policy for the country that was aligned with the new political direction. As Alexei Arbatov pointed out, "There is no reason to doubt the good intentions of the policy's authors: they sincerely wanted to advance Russian foreign policy to a new level of relations with the civilized nations of the world and transcend the traditional framework of geopolitics and strategic balances and they sought to found these relations on common values and international law."⁷ This attitude towards Russia-West relations was interpreted in the West as one of the clear indications that Russia was involved in a process of democratization. It was an interpretation that was further supported by the fact that the West strongly expected Russia's institutional changes (adoption of a democratic constitution, a new parliament, and free elections) to mean that Russia was on the road to democracy.

The road proved to have many bumps. Domestic elite competition and the elite's fear of losing power turned the tide against liberal policies. As Gel'man has observed: "What would move the elites towards democracy, if we assume that democracy is not the power of those who proclaim themselves 'democrats,' but (rather) political contestation and accountability, which includes the threat of elites' loss of power?"⁸ In the power struggle between Boris Yeltsin and the Supreme Soviet in autumn 1993, the zero-sum principle applied and Yeltsin came out as the winner.

⁷ Alexei Arbatov, 2004. "Russian Foreign Policy Thinking in Transition," in Vladimir Baranovsky (ed.), *Russia and Europe – The Emerging Security Agenda*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 139.

⁸ Vladimir Gel'man, 2002. "Russia's Elites in Search of Consensus: What Kind of Consolidation?" *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization*, 10 (3), 345.

This victory made it possible to establish a superpresidential model,⁹ which meant that different elite groups competed to have Yeltsin's ear during the following years.

The building of democratic institutions embarked on at the beginning of the 1990s appeared to have stalled at an early stage and Russia became stuck in a semi-democratic/semi-authoritarian political system. The argument made in the mid-2000s by Teague seems to be valid then and now: "the Russian population and its leaders remain undecided over the kind of country they want to build."¹⁰ This raises the question of whether Russia could be considered a democratizing country at any stage, or for more than a couple of years. However the consensus seemed to be that some kind of a regime change had taken place in Russia in the early 1990s.

The Russian presidential election of 1996 provides an useful snapshot of the state of democratization in Russia. Although there have been later allegations of widespread fraud in order to ensure Yeltsin's re-election, at the time the elections were regarded as clean and fair.¹¹ In his 2001 book, Michael McFaul argued that the significance of the 1996 election was that all parties accepted the rules of the game. While Yeltsin's advisers suggested to him that he could suspend the electoral process or in some other way avoid standing for re-election in 1996, at a time when his popularity was at its lowest, he rejected this option and went ahead with an election he might have lost. According to McFaul, Yeltsin's action set an important precedent that helped establish constitutionalism and open elections as accepted practice. Writing soon after the much more managed election of Vladimir Putin as Yeltsin's successor in 2000, he maintained that the coronation-like nature of this election was a temporary aberration, with the 1996 contest providing the more normal template which would be followed thereafter.¹² The fact that this prognosis has subsequently proved wrong, with the 2000 election providing the template that has been followed since, does not invalidate the view of democratization as developing in the 1990s even if Russia never managed to consolidate its democracy.

⁹ Lilia Shevtsova. 1999. *Yeltsin's Russia: Myths and Reality*, Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

¹⁰ Elizabeth Teague. 2005. "Citizenship, Borders and National Identity," in Alexander J. Motyl, Blair A. Ruble and Lilia Shevtsova (eds), *Russia's Engagement with the West: Transformation and Integration in the Twenty-First Century*, Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 29.

¹¹ Michael Meadowcroft. 1996. *Report on Elections*, OSCE ODIHR report, <http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/russia/16288?download=true> (accessed October 13, 2014).

¹² Michael McFaul. 2001. *Russia's Unfinished Revolution: Political Change from Gorbachev to Putin*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Great Power Nationalism in Russia

While there have been occasions before 2014 when the Russian regime has moved to embrace elements of Russian nationalism, for the most part political nationalism has been associated with the populist Liberal Democratic Party of Russia led by Vladimir Zhirinovskiy. Indeed, it has been argued that the reason Putin has continued to tolerate Zhirinovskiy and allow the LDPR seats in the Duma is so that he can present himself as a moderate when it comes to Russian nationalism. Thus, in spite of Mansfield and Snyder's assertion that the Chechen conflicts were instances of "nationalist bidding wars,"¹³ the kind of nationalist mobilization that is generally a feature of the war-prone democratizing states is not readily observed in Russia. However, while this model assumes that nationalist competition among political elites in partial democracies is one of the factors leading to war, there is no particular reason why elite competition must be limited to classical nationalism. In Russia, for a variety of reasons,¹⁴ nationalism has not achieved the same role at the state level as in many other partial democracies. But an equivalent discourse, which can equally be linked to war proneness, can be found in the concept of "greatpowerness," including great power nationalism.

Consistently throughout its history, through different leaders and different international environments, Russia has claimed great power status. When Putin started his time in power, he defined the special Russian values as being patriotism, *derzhavnost* (greatpowerness) and *gosudarstvennichestvo* (state-centeredness).¹⁵ Both patriotism and great-power thinking are supported in Russian society across the political spectrum. As David McDonald has put it: "...whatever the ambiguities or contradictions in the rhetoric of Russian absolutism and statehood, Russians from virtually all sections of society and on either side of the state-society divide agree that Russia is 'fated to be a Great Power.'"¹⁶

Russia's great power status suffered tremendously after the break-up of the Soviet Union, and critics castigated Yeltsin for not doing enough to restore it. Yeltsin promised to lift the new Russian nation-state to the level of a recognized great power, with political stability and integration

¹³ Mansfield and Snyder, *Electing to Fight*, 258.

¹⁴ For a number of the reasons for the weakness of Russian state nationalism, see Geoffrey Hosking, 2006. *Rulers and Victims: The Russians in the Soviet Union*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press.

¹⁵ Pål Kolstø, 2004. "Nation/Building in Russia: A Value-oriented Strategy," in Pål Kolstø and Helge Blakkisrud (eds.) *Nation-Building and Common Values in Russia*, Lanham, Maryland: Rowan & Littlefield, 1-27.

¹⁶ David McDonald, 2007. "Domestic Conjunctions, The Russian State, and the World Outside, 1700-2006," in Robert Legvold (ed.), *Russian Foreign Policy in the 21st Century and the Shadow of the Past*, New York: Columbia University Press, 163.

into Western civilization, but he was not able to fulfil these promises. Statements like Andranik Migrayan's "for too long we have kept the West under the impression that a positive foreign policy in the case of the Soviet Union and then Russia is when we go along with everything the West does. That is why any sign of independence in Russia's foreign policy catches the West unawares and sees it as abnormal,"¹⁷ started to appear in the Russian press. The discourse of arguing for Russia as a great power has become stronger as time passes since the fall of the Soviet Union and has been exploited in much the same way as a nationalist card can be used.¹⁸ Yeltsin did need to find a way to show his critics and the nationalist great power opposition that he could act decisively and that Russia could defend its territory.

Elite Competition and Institution Building in Russia

The other cause for the rise of nationalism, according to the theory of war-proneness in democratizing regimes, is that the break-up of authoritarian regimes threatens powerful interests, including military bureaucracies and economic actors that derive a parochial benefit from war and empire.¹⁹ In Russia the different interest groups started to battle for money and political influence even before the Soviet Union broke up. This trend weakened institution building and reinforced the use of nationalism or, in Russia's case, the use of great power nationalism.

During Yeltsin's tenure in office, his mistrust of Communism and problems with the security organizations meant that strengthening institutions and the consolidation of democracy were never priorities. Russia's large army and military structures did suffer with the break-up of the Soviet Union. In traditional terms, the image of the army is of great importance for a great power. It was also this military and security elite that had already opposed Gorbachev's new thinking in foreign policy and his *perestroika* in domestic politics. Among them was a strong feeling that Gorbachev's reforms had undermined the Soviet Union's international status.

The stability that has appeared in Russian politics during Putin's presidential administration has much to do with the fact that he reintegrated the security sector into politics and increased the military budget at the expense of institution building, which may also have contributed to a more aggressive foreign and security policy. As Emma Gilligan has written in her book *Terror in Chechnya: Russia and the Tragedy of Civilians in War*: "The attempts by the Putin presidency to restore Russian identity and status

¹⁷ Cited in Aleksei K. Pushkov. 1993. "Russia and America: the Honeymoon's Over," *Russian Foreign Policy*, 76-90.

¹⁸ Hanna Smith. 2014. *Russian Greatpowerness: Foreign Policy, the Two Chechen Wars and International Organisations*. PhD. dissertation, University of Helsinki.

¹⁹ Mansfield and Snyder. "Democratic Transitions, Institutional Strength and War," 299.

through a revived nationalist agenda were also arguments for seizing and retaining control over the state.”²⁰ Gilligan quotes Putin as saying in early 2000, when he was the newly elected president, that the Federal Security Service (FSB) wanted to return to power and with his presidential election this goal was now fulfilled.²¹ So both Chechen wars contributed to the fact that the military and the security elite had returned to the core of Russian politics.

Yeltsin came to power after a power struggle with Gorbachev and his best “weapon” in this fight was to weaken central power. This conflict resulted in Yeltsin’s rise to power, but also undermined the central state. In the process of radical regime change, a federalist model is perhaps not the best possible outcome at first: “...while federalism may generate certain benefits for mature democracies, the decentralization and fragmentation of power in newly democratizing regimes is likely to exacerbate the problems attendant to democratic transitions.”²² The Russian polity became a hybrid regime under Yeltsin.²³ In theory this situation contained the possibility of Russia developing toward a more institutionalized democracy, but it also carried a danger of elite power struggles, which actually occurred in the late 1990s.

The fragmentation of political authority in the early years of the Russian Federation was typical of the conditions of elite competition described by Mansfield and Snyder. The tensions between president and the parliament were resolved by force in 1993; center-periphery competition led to major concessions to regions like Tatarstan by the federal government; oligarchs competed with each other for political influence as well as for the economic spoils of privatization; in electoral politics, nationalist and Communist parties continued to poll well, while a proliferation of liberal parties split that section of the vote; divisions within the administration were reflected in inconsistent or changing policy directions – for example in foreign policy, the dominance of a “euro-atlanticist” direction lasted little more than a year before “Eurasianist” factions came to the fore.

This and other accounts of the development of Russian politics highlight the personalized nature of politics under Putin, a process whose beginnings can be seen in the strengthening of the presidential system by Yeltsin after 1993. Increasingly, and especially in the last decade, a

²⁰ Emma Gilligan. 2010. *Terror in Chechnya: Russia and the Tragedy of Civilians in War*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 13.

²¹ Gilligan, *Terror in Chechnya*, 13.

²² Mansfield and Snyder, “Democratic Transition, Institutional Strength and War,” 301.

²³ Lilia Shevtsova. 2004. “The Second Putin Presidency: Modernization by Returning to Traditionalism,” in Yuri Fedorov and Bertil Nygren, *Putin I and Putin II – Results of the First term and prospects for the Second*, Stockholm: Swedish National Defense College, 7-23.

growing stranglehold on political and civil liberties has accompanied this incomplete democratization – in other words, the institutions of democracy have become steadily weaker. The argument here is that the two wars in Chechnya played an important part in contributing to this process – as well as being the product of an incomplete democratization, the wars defined the security elites' dominant position in Russian politics. As Daniel Treisman has argued in relation to the first Chechen war: "Hawks favored a military strategy for reasons that were transparent – to strengthen the image of the Russian state, enhance the role of the armed forces, even to create an environment for restricting freedoms elsewhere."²⁴

An indication of this elite competition in the domestic political scene can also be seen in the discourse surrounding Russia's foreign policy. One of the characteristics of the foreign policy of a democratizing state is that "partially democratizing countries with weak political institutions often lack the governmental coherence and predictability to send clear and credible signals of commitment to allies and enemies alike. One faction may signal willingness to compromise whereas another may signal an inclination for preventive war."²⁵ While divisions over foreign policy were less sharp than the euro-Atlanticist/Eurasianist division of the early Yeltsin years, this characterization is precisely what analysts of Russian foreign policy have been coming to grips with – on the one hand, Russia has indicated its willingness to cooperate with the West, and, on the other hand, suddenly there have been episodes of antagonistic behavior towards the West.

Putin may have weakened the impact of elite competition through his manipulation of the factions around him, but a process of consolidation was needed before then. Between 1996 and 1999, the question of the presidential succession was wide open, thus providing a spur for a new competition inside the Russian political elite. A number of prime ministers and ministers came and went, leading to renewed speculation over the succession. In 1997, the rising star and heir apparent was the committed liberal Boris Nemtsov who, according to opinion polls, enjoyed the support of over 50 percent of the population as the next president. His star waned after the financial crisis of 1998, and it seemed more likely that a longer serving establishment stalwart like Yevgeny Primakov might succeed Yeltsin. When he was appointed prime minister and then acting president, Putin was relatively unknown and did not have a firm basis of support from his earlier KGB service,²⁶ although he was able to call on co-workers from

²⁴ Daniel Treisman. 2011. *The Return: Russia's Journey from Gorbachev to Medvedev*, New York: Free Press, 292.

²⁵ Mansfield and Snyder, "Democratic Transitions, Institutional Strength and War," 302.

²⁶ Richard Sakwa. 2011. *The Crisis of Russian Democracy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 118.

St. Petersburg, where he had worked for much of the 1990s. In contrast to Yeltsin, who had established a high level of personal popularity and legitimacy before being confirmed as the head of an independent state, only then having to ward off challenges to his authority, Putin needed to establish legitimacy at the same time as becoming Russia's leader.

Challenges to the Theory of Democratization and War

So far the case of Russia's partial democratization fits very well into the theory advanced by Mansfield and Snyder about the characteristics of a democratizing state, although with some qualifications: the use and rise of nationalism, elite competition and the weakness of institutions. There are some controversies in the theoretical debate about the effects of democratization on countries' war proneness. Research carried out by Gleditsch and Ward comes to the same conclusion as Mansfield and Snyder that rocky and especially rapid transitions or reversals are associated with countervailing effects; namely they increase the risk of being involved in warfare, but in the long term and while societies undergo democratic change the risks of war are reduced by successful democratization and are exacerbated by reversals in the democratization process.²⁷ They do suggest that democratization generally proceeds in a way such as to reduce the risk of war and point out that special attention needs to be given to the direction of the regime change, its magnitude and smoothness, and not only to the existence of change in authority characteristics.²⁸

In the debate about how and to what extent the democratization process makes states war prone, especially in interstate conflicts, some argue that the "political neighborhood" in which the process takes place has a large impact on the probability of conflict.²⁹ This analysis by Gleditsch and Hegre focuses on the democratic/autocratic balance in the system of the political environment, and so the environment conditions whether democratization is followed by war. Here, naturally, elite competition plays a major role. In Russia, already in October 1993, with the shelling of the White House, it became clear that elite competition was to determine the outcome of the Russian democratization process. Voices arguing for order and tougher measures to keep the order, a position that promoted the security service and army, started to grow stronger. Instability in Russia in the early 1990s favored those groups and they succeeded in getting the president's ear.

William R. Thompson also emphasizes the importance of the

²⁷ Michael D. Ward and Kristian Gleditsch. 1998. "Democratizing for Peace," *American Political Science Review*, 92 (1), 51.

²⁸ Ward and Gleditsch. "Democratizing for Peace," 59.

²⁹ Nils Petter Gleditsch and Havard Hegre. 1997. "Peace and Democracy: Three Levels of Analysis," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 41 (2), 283-310.

political environment, but from a slightly different perspective than Gleditch and Hegre. Thompson focuses on the conflict environment and the geopolitical climate as predictors of conflict. He argues that in regions where states are involved in aggressively making and preparing for war, the political composition of the region will most likely be autocratic as elites attempt to mobilize national resources towards survival and expansion. Once the regional primacy strategies fade, the absence of war allows for the emergence of more liberal political regimes.³⁰ These claims that environment, whether the geopolitical climate or the balance of regimes, influences the outcome and style of the democratization process have grown in importance, especially since the color revolutions in Russia's neighborhood, Russia's war with Georgia and the 2014 developments in Ukraine. Thompson's considerations present us with the following conclusion: war may effect subsequent democratic change and democratic change may affect the subsequent outbreak of war.³¹

The Chechen Wars

At the end of 1994, following three years in which the Chechen Republic, under the leadership of former air force officer Dzhokar Dudaev, had defied Moscow's authority and proclaimed its independence, Yeltsin authorized a full-scale invasion which sought to bring Chechnya rapidly back under the control of the central government. What happened instead was that the shortcomings of the Russian military were brutally exposed, while the bravery of Chechen rebels meant that the conflict turned into a prolonged war in which Russian soldiers' lives were lost, terrorism emerged as a problem for the regime, and accusations were levelled against the Russian state of systematic abuses of human rights. Further military failings in 1996 forced the newly re-elected President Yeltsin to make peace on terms which left the future status of Chechnya indeterminate.

The theory of war-proneness among democratizing regimes predicts that partially democratized countries may be more prone to wars with other states. In their writings, Mansfield and Snyder recognize that the Chechen wars do not count as international wars, but they point to the fact that the second war took place after Chechnya had achieved *de facto* independence.³² Leaving aside objections as to whether Chechnya was *de facto* independent in either 1994 or 1999, the question posed here is whether this argument can be extended to a case of internal wars. The

³⁰ William R. Thompson. 1996. "Democracy and Peace: Putting the Cart before the Horse?," *International Organisations*, 50 (1), 141-174.

³¹ Mark J. C. Crescenzi and Andrew J. Enterline. 1999. "Ripples from the Waves? A Systemic, Time-Series Analysis of Democracy, Democratization and Interstate War," *Journal of Peace Research*, 36 (1), 75-94.

³² Mansfield and Snyder, *Electing to Fight*, 257.

two wars initiated by Moscow in Chechnya were both directed against a clearly defined territory, an organized separate military and administration, and an ethnic identity which was totally distinct from that of the dominant Russian nationality.

With great power nationalism, the Chechen wars were based on much the same dynamic as the cases of interstate wars discussed by Mansfield and Snyder, with elite competition and the need for regime legitimization among the key drivers. One significant difference connected both to the issue of great power nationalism and to the fact that the Chechen wars were internal conflicts is that they were in some sense aimed at establishing legitimacy not only in domestic politics but also in the international arena. By contrast, nationalism-inspired interstate wars are aimed at the domestic constituency and are generally impossible to justify in the international community. In Russia's case the great power nationalism links the domestic and international.

In international diplomatic terms, the first decision to use force in Chechnya was itself peculiar, given that in 1994 Russia was building bridges, especially toward Europe, through international institutions, and the invasion risked jeopardizing the progress already made. During that year Russia signed a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) with the European Union, the progress of Russia becoming a member in the Council of Europe was very positive and two Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) documents which committed Russia to give advance notice of troop movements and to take measures to minimize civilian casualties: the Vienna document on Confidence and Security Building Measures (CSBM) and the OSCE Code of Conduct on Politico-Military Aspects of security. The launch of the Chechen war violated both of the OSCE agreements, and the nature of the whole case broke general OSCE norms and rules.³³ The reactions by the EU showed that the foundations of the PCA agreement suffered a blow even before it was ratified and the membership negotiations became more complicated with the Council of Europe. All this reinforced the impression that there had been a democratization process in Russia that was now grinding to a halt.

In the Russian domestic political arena, the war badly divided the political groups. During 1995, a court case was launched in Russia to challenge the decision to use military force in Chechnya. This led even Foreign Minister Kozyrev, who has been labelled a pro-Western liberal, to excuse Russia from having to account for her actions before the world in an interview in October 1995: "Generally speaking, it is not only our right, but our duty not to allow uncontrolled armed formations on our territory.

³³ Christer Pursiainen. 1999. "International Security regimes, OSCE and Chechnya," in Ted Hopf (ed.) *Understandings of Russian Foreign Policy*, Philadelphia: Penn State Press, 1999, 135-6.

The Foreign Ministry stands on guard over the country's territorial unity. International law says that a country not only can, but must, use force in such instances ... I say it was the right thing to do ... The way in which it was done is not my business."³⁴

Yeltsin had used the federalist model, calling for regions to take as much power as they could, in his power struggle with Gorbachev, but it turned against him in the first Chechen war. Dudayev's regime seized the opportunity and, as Mansfield and Snyder's analysis would predict, when a regime breakdown occurs, the Chechen elites used the nationalist card to advance their hold on power in Chechnya. Dudayev's nationalist position can be seen as a strategy that was based on historical animosity between Russia and Chechnya. However it is highly questionable whether Dudayev really wanted Chechen independence or only to consolidate his own power in Chechnya and full control over the resources in the region. One of the indicators that Dudayev was not planning an armed conflict with Russia was that he continuously called for a personal meeting with Yeltsin. In regard to the first Chechen war, Galina Starovoitova, shortly before she was murdered, wrote: "Chechnya was a unique case, containing an over determined number of strategic and historical-institutional factors pointing towards secession, but also one that did not need to result in war."³⁵ She made the point that a face-to-face meeting between Dudayev and Yeltsin might have prevented the outbreak of the war. This point is disputed by Daniel Treisman who sees the reason for the first war in Chechnya as a security and prestige issue.³⁶ Whether the situation really needed to result in a war, or whether the situation was portrayed to Yeltsin in that way as a result of elite power competition, is still an open question.

The start of the first Chechen war can be seen as Yeltsin's attempt to satisfy Russian great power nationalism. He used the army to show that Russia would be able to crack down on regions' nationalistic excesses. He had to demonstrate that when his country's security and prestige was at stake, he was able to make decisions that reflected Russia's standing as a great power, and to reverse his own notion of giving as much power to the regions as they could handle in favor of central authority. Yeltsin also sought to consolidate public and elite opinion behind a united line – Russia as a strong state, as Mansfield and Snyder have pointed out.³⁷

One of the ways that Yeltsin sought to reinforce Russia's image as a strong state was by using the war to promote the Russian military, which had suffered badly from the break-up of the Soviet Union. The failures of

³⁴ *Sevodnya*, 1995, October 20, 9.

³⁵ Matthew Evangelista. 2002. *The Chechen Wars-Will Russia Go the Way of the Soviet Union?* Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 5.

³⁶ Daniel Treisman, *The Return*, 292-294

³⁷ Mansfield and Snyder, "Democratization and War," 90.

the war meant that this aim was not achieved. However, the war had the unintended consequence of raising the profile of the military in Russian politics, which meant that Yeltsin could not stay in office without the security services behind him. One of the best indicators of the return of the military was the case of the popular military commander Alexander Lebed running as a presidential candidate in the 1996 elections and winning nearly 15 percent of the votes in the first round. After the elections, he became an advisor to Yeltsin and secretary of the Security Council. Lebed was also seen as responsible for the Khasaviurt Agreement in 1996, which left the Chechen republic's status open, already then paving the way to the second Chechen war.

Furthermore the relationship between Defense Minister Pavel Grachev and Yeltsin also shows the link between the military and politics. Grachev had helped Yeltsin maintain his power in the conflict between the parliament and president in autumn 1993, and was among those who lobbied for the first Chechen war. It is quite clear that when the Russian state began to engage in combat, the role of the military in power consolidation became central and so also contributed to increasing authoritarian trends in Russian politics.

During 1993-2000, despite the humiliating failures of the Russian military, the Russian army enjoyed more trust than any other public institutions in Russia.³⁸ Furthermore, the war situation favored the adoption of legislation that gave more powers to security organizations. The shifting balance toward such force-wielding agencies contradicted the European Convention on Human Rights and, according to some, even the Russian constitution itself. Such legislation included presidential decree No.1226 "On immediate measures for the protection of the population against banditry and other manifestations of organized crime" and the law "On the organs of the Federal Security Service (FSB) in the Russian Federation." The law about the powers and activity of the FSB was seen by Council of Europe Rapporteur Mr. Binding as follows: "It can be seen as a great danger to democratic society and the rule of law that the security service FSB has nearly equivalent power to that of the old Soviet KGB."³⁹ Arguably the first Chechen war started a vicious circle that Russia has had difficulty exiting.

There was a chance to restore stability and reconstruct Chechnya on the basis of the Khasaviurt Agreement, signed in August 1996, and the Treaty on Peace and Principles of Mutual Relations between the Russian Federation and the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, signed in May 1997.

³⁸ Public Opinion survey conducted by VTsIOM cited in Valerie Sperling. 2001. "Opposition to the War in Chechnya: Antimilitarist Organizing in Russia," *PONARS Policy Memo*, no. 224, December.

³⁹ Bindig. 1996. Russian Application for membership of the Council of Europe, Doc. 7463, January 18, Opinion.

The Chechen presidential election in January 1997, bringing the victory of Aslan Maskhadov, were also seen as positive signs. The government in the war-torn area was, however, unable to bring the territory under full control without financial help for the reconstruction of its infrastructure and was unable to generate employment opportunities. Moscow was unwilling to provide this help. Furthermore Moscow did not look favorably on any international organization becoming influential on the ground in Chechnya.

Although some see the Chechen war as an attempt by the military to find a greater role in society, in 1999 it was not so much a case of finding a mission, as one of making up for the prestige lost in the first Chechen War. In fact, though, the initiative for the renewal of hostilities in 1999 did not come from the Defense Ministry, but from the Ministry of the Interior, which had started to gain power in Russian politics at this time. The kidnapping of an interior ministry official made the then Minister of the Interior Sergei Stepashin call for a new mission in Chechnya. Thus, planning for a second Chechen war began in early 1999.⁴⁰

Once the invasion of Dagestan by Chechen forces led by Shamil Basaev and Khattab occurred in August 1999, and bombs destroyed several Moscow apartment buildings, killing hundreds, Russia's leaders made clear that they would defend its territorial integrity like any other great power. As Putin himself said in an interview for the TV program *Zerkalo* in early 2000 "In my opinion, the active public support for our actions in the Caucasus is due not only to a sense of hurt national identity but also to a vague feeling ... that the state has become weak. And it ought to be strong."⁴¹

Whereas the First Chechen War took most people by surprise and divided Russian society, especially after the first military setbacks, the second war had been longer coming and considerable groundwork had gone into preparing both the political elite and the public. While Putin was still some way from establishing his own authority, he could count on the acquiescence of the elite as a whole more than was possible in 1994, and was able to fight a war with the backing of the public at large. Through the discourse of international terrorism, he was also able to call on international support in a way which had not been possible before.

The fight against terrorism had become one of the major priorities of the Russian state. All the major foreign and security policy documents stressed the danger of terrorism; the Russian national security concept saw international terrorism attempting to weaken and split Russia; in its military doctrine, Russia named terrorism as the most dangerous factor threatening the country's internal unity, and the Russian foreign policy

⁴⁰ Evangelista. *The Chechen Wars*, 79.

⁴¹ RTR, program *Zerkalo*, January 23, 2000.

doctrine stressed the importance of international cooperation in the fight against international terrorism. These documents reinforced the picture that there was a serious security challenge to Russian statehood. All three documents were published in 2000, following Putin's inauguration as president, at a time when security and stability in Russian society were his most potent political slogans. At the same time, the fight against terrorism contributed to tighter control of society by the state. For example, legislation was introduced that tightened the control of the media.⁴²

The second Chechen war and the war against terrorism united for the first time since the break-up of the Soviet Union the different Russian political lines: liberal, communist, and nationalist. Moreover, the army and security institutions, as well as public opinion moved to support the Russian president and his government. Opinion polls showed that the Russian population overwhelmingly (73 percent) supported the war in March 2000.⁴³

Only a few newspaper articles questioned the operation in Chechnya. Yevgeny Krutikov wrote in *Izvestia*: "Why do we Russians do all this and what exactly do our leaders want to gain by using all this force?"⁴⁴ State Duma member Alexei Arbatov, an expert on security issues, warned in 1999: "Never step into the same war twice" in an article in *Obshaya Gazeta*.⁴⁵ These warnings, however, were not heard by the general public.

The support Putin had from both the elite and public gave him a large mandate to consolidate power and create a state system that eventually became known as "managed" or "sovereign" democracy. If Yeltsin did not succeed in consolidating power with the first Chechen war, Putin did so with the second one.

The Democratization Process, Russia, and the Chechen Wars

Russia's wars in Chechnya make it possible to extend the Mansfield/Snyder argument in two ways. First, the democratization process increases a state's proneness to armed conflict both internationally and domestically. Second, war involvement on the part of democratizing countries can slow down or reverse the democratization process.

The case of Russia can also be used to support some critiques of the theory linking the democratization process to war proneness. Russia's regime change after the collapse of the Soviet Union was extreme, and the

⁴² See, for example: "War on Terrorism and the Freedom of the Mass Media: Laws restricting the Freedom of the Mass Media," 2004, in Susanna Niloltchev (ed.), *Political Debate and the Role of Media: The Fragility of Free Speech*, European Audiovisual Observatory, 117-122.

⁴³ Sperling, *Opposition to the War in Chechnya*.

⁴⁴ Jevgeni Krutikov. 1999. "Chechen Rakes," *Izvestia*, September 28.

⁴⁵ Alexei Arbatov. 1999. "Never step into the same war twice," *Obshaya Gazeta*, No. 39, September 30-October 6.

elite power struggles were intense. The first Chechen war was clearly a result of the institutional weakness of Russia, of pressure from the military and security elites, federal divisions and, the use of nationalist rhetoric in Chechnya threatening Russian territorial integrity and the quest for Russian great power status. Therefore the war can be seen a result of the nature of domestic political competition after the break-up of the Soviet Union. Thus Russia fits with Gleditch and Ward's conclusion that "While these new regimes may be less repressive and permit greater political freedom than their precursors, they are also subject to instability and attempts by challengers to seize power."⁴⁶ This was also a significant factor in 1999, since the second war in the end helped to consolidate political power in Putin's hands.

In Thompson and Tucker's critique of Mansfield and Snyder's analysis the important question is advanced: "Whether it is regime change overall, certain types of regime change or simply regime instability that alters the probability of war involvement?"⁴⁷ This can also be asked about the case of Russia's war involvement. The rocky and rapid regime change in Russia resulted in instability in the political system as well as political competition. The economy switched from central planning to market mechanisms causing even more confusion. The federalist model was initially applied to advance one power group's hold on power, and disregarded the fact that it undermined the whole existence of the state. The resulting chaos made war-fighting seem like a reasonable alternative.

The weak institutions, elite politics, and use of nationalism that characterize most of the post-Soviet states suggests that each country has a propensity towards using force. This tendency is visible in the cases of Russia, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Moldova, and in a different form in Tajikistan, where conflict took on more of the form of a classic civil war. In other cases, rapid institution building succeeded in creating a more stable basis for peaceful democratic development.

As with other forms of nationalism, greatpowerness can and has been used to mobilize the population around a unified regime. In the case of the second Chechen war, the unprecedented unanimity of support from the public and from different state institutions were based both on the appeal of greatpowerness and on discourses highlighting the existential threat from international terrorism. The combination of promoting Russia as a great power and fighting terrorism made it possible for Putin to portray any opposition to the president as unpatriotic. The president used this opportunity to consolidate the state, recentralize power away from the regions, move towards managed democracy, and impose greater controls on the media.

⁴⁶ Ward and Gleditch, "Democratizing for Peace," 53.

⁴⁷ Thompson and Tucker, "A Tale of Two Democratic Peace Critiques," 441.

Thompson and Tucker's analysis together with Mansfield and Snyder's theory raise the possibility that Russia is caught in a vicious circle: the democratization process leads to greater war proneness and engaging in such fighting limits prospects for further democratization. In Russia's case, the great power tradition leads to a greater propensity to conflict, but conflict itself, in the case of the Chechen wars, has reinforced the great power tendency and weakened Russia's democratization potential. Russian military action in Georgia in 2008 and in Ukraine in 2014 were clearly also linked to greatpowerness and would have been harder to justify in the eyes of the Russian public had it not been for the successes of the second Chechen War.

Conclusion

Following the two Chechen wars in Russia, there is not much left of the political processes of the early 1990s that could still be seen as democratization or transition from authoritarianism to democracy. As one observer has summarized the situation: "Putin's regime relies on a control system over political actors, institutions and the rules of the game. Its basic elements are, first a strengthened presidency alongside the weakening all other institutions, including both houses of parliament, judiciary and regional bodies; second, state control over the media; and third, control over elections, turning them from the means of the empowerment of the people into the means of legitimization of the decisions made by the elite."⁴⁸

The fact that rapid and rocky regime change increases the likelihood to engage in war or conflict is a regime survival technique in the globalized world. The new regime needs an enemy which can be fought to increase popular legitimacy, thereby giving elites and the public incentives to support it. If the regime chooses the path of conflict and the use of force, the democratization process is threatened and in many cases reversed, but if it chooses the incentives that are offered through the use of peaceful external relations and sees the advantages of integration into the community of democratic countries, the process may enjoy success.

The first Chechen war started at a very vulnerable point in time regarding Russian state building, both in terms of identity and system. Even if the Mansfield/Snyder analysis concentrates on interstate relations, they themselves count Chechnya as part of the picture too. As they have pointed out: "Although the Chechen conflicts were not international wars, they manifested a number of the causal mechanisms we have outlined: gambling for resurrection, nationalist bidding wars, and the resort to

⁴⁸ Michael Emerson. 2005. "Introduction," in Michael Emerson. *Democratization in the European Neighbourhood*. Brussels: CEPS publication, 5.

nationalist prestige strategies in order to govern amid the political stalemate of a weakly institutionalized semi-democracy.⁴⁹ The result of the first Chechen war was a strengthened presidency in Russia although with a weakened mandate. Yeltsin lost much of his popularity among the Russian people, but was still able to act in a more authoritarian fashion with the security and military establishment's help. This situation led to measures both formal, in the form of presidential decrees, and informal, in the form of the elite power balance, that put a severe strain on Russia's already halting democratic development.

The second Chechen war was much more a "textbook case" of the theory. "Vladimir Putin used the war to maintain the constraints on Russia's democracy and to strengthen his power as president within."⁵⁰ Putin's first eight years in power show a trajectory of political development which does not follow the road of Western understandings of democracy. Today Russia is in the situation described by Krastev: "In Russia and China, the recurring line is that 'there is no political alternative' to the current leaders. [...] what is taken out of the equation is the possibility to challenge those in power. People are not allowed to elect wrong leaders, so elections are either controlled, or rigged, or banned for the sake of 'good governance.'⁵¹ The power elite under Putin had learned from the mistakes of the 1990s and also saw that with a popular mandate supporting them, laws and regulations could be adopted without opposition.

⁴⁹ Mansfield and Snyder, *Electing to Fight*, 258.

⁵⁰ Mansfield and Snyder, *Electing to Fight*, 271.

⁵¹ Ivan Krastev. 2013. "The Rise and Fall of Democracy? Meritocracy? Why Modern Elites Have no Legitimacy and Capacity to Govern," *Russia in Global Affairs*, June 29, <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/number/The-Rise-and-Fall-of-Democracy-Meritocracy-16030>, (accessed on May 11, 2014).



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**Statement of Ownership, Management, and Circulation
(All Periodicals Publications Except Requester Publications)**

1. Publication Title DEMOKRATIZATSIYA	2. Publication Number 014 - 626	3. Filing Date 10/1/2014
4. Issue Frequency QUARTERLY	5. Number of Issues Published Annually 4	6. Annual Subscription Price IND \$65; INST \$192
7. Complete Mailing Address of Known Office of Publication (Not printer) (Street, city, county, state, and ZIP+4®) IERES 1957 E STREET NW SUITE 412 WASHINGTON, DC 20052		Contact Person ROBERT ORTTUNG Telephone (Include area code) (202)994-5730

8. Complete Mailing Address of Headquarters or General Business Office of Publisher (Not printer)

HENRY HALE FOR IERES
1957 E STREET NW SUITE 412 WASHINGTON, DC 20052

9. Full Names and Complete Mailing Addresses of Publisher, Editor, and Managing Editor (Do not leave blank)

Publisher (Name and complete mailing address)

HENRY HALE FOR IERES
1957 E STREET NW SUITE 412 WASHINGTON, DC 20052

Editor (Name and complete mailing address)

HENRY HALE FOR IERES
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Managing Editor (Name and complete mailing address)

ROBERT ORTTUNG
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The purpose, function, and nonprofit status of this organization and the exempt status for federal income tax purposes:

- Has Not Changed During Preceding 12 Months
- Has Changed During Preceding 12 Months (Publisher must submit explanation of change with this statement)

13. Publication Title		14. Issue Date for Circulation Data Below	
DEMOKRATIZATSIYA		SUMMER 2014	
15. Extent and Nature of Circulation		Average No. Copies Each Issue During Preceding 12 Months	No. Copies of Single Issue Published Nearest to Filing Date
a. Total Number of Copies (Net press run)		314	315
b. Paid Circulation (By Mail and Outside the Mail)	(1) Mailed Outside-County Paid Subscriptions Stated on PS Form 3541 (Include paid distribution above nominal rate, advertiser's proof copies, and exchange copies)	60	56
	(2) Mailed In-County Paid Subscriptions Stated on PS Form 3541 (Include paid distribution above nominal rate, advertiser's proof copies, and exchange copies)	0	0
	(3) Paid Distribution Outside the Mails Including Sales Through Dealers and Carriers, Street Vendors, Counter Sales, and Other Paid Distribution Outside USPS®	24	25
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h. Total (Sum of 15f and g)		314	315
i. Percent Paid (15c divided by 15f times 100)		90%	96%

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a. Paid Electronic Copies ▶	23	23
b. Total Paid Print Copies (Line 15c) + Paid Electronic Copies (Line 16a) ▶	107	104
c. Total Print Distribution (Line 15f) + Paid Electronic Copies (Line 16a) ▶	116	107
d. Percent Paid (Both Print & Electronic Copies) (16b divided by 16c × 100) ▶	92%	97%

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17. Publication of Statement of Ownership

 If the publication is a general publication, publication of this statement is required. Will be printed in the October 2014 issue of this publication.
 Publication not required.

18. Signature and Title of Editor, Publisher, Business Manager, or Owner

 Robert W. Orttung
 Managing Editor

Date

10/1/2014

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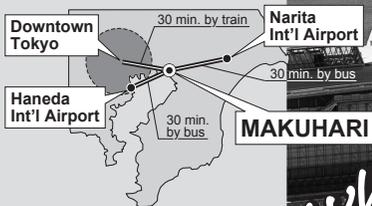
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