

Jane Burbank, New York University

Abstract

In the spring of 1991, campaigning in Tatarstan for the presidency of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, Boris Yeltsin pronounced his famous phrase, "Take as much sovereignty as you can swallow." Many aspects of the political moment were novel to Yeltsin, his listeners, and Soviet citizens generally. The Communist Party, after what later turned out to have been its last party conference in July 1990, no longer claimed a monopoly on political representation. Yeltsin, a successful insider self-transformed into an ardent and flamboyant critic of the Soviet leadership, had left the party and was running against an array of Communist candidates. Most radically, this was the first time the leader of the Russian Republic, the largest of the fifteen "union" republics that composed the Soviet Union, was to be elected directly by popular vote. Nothing was politics as usual for Soviet citizens at the time, although no one knew that the country would disappear, along with Communist power, by the end of the year. But still what would possess a political activist running for president of the Russian Republic to invite people in the Tatar Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, a sub-unit of the Russian federal republic with a large non-Russian population, to stake as big a claim as possible on political authority?