Explaining Russian Protest: Individual Mobilization in Contemporary Autocracy
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Relying on original data, this paper explores the contributions of Russianists to the field of social movement theory. The introduction of the collective action approach to social movement research transformed the field as scholars worked to understand why individuals protest to pursue political goals. Developed on the eve of the Communist revolutions, individual-level theories of protest mobilization were well-suited to meet the challenge of understanding collective action in the context of limited civic organization and state repression of opposition. A decade later, the hybrid and increasingly non-democratic regimes of the post-Soviet spaces raised both challenges and opportunities to study protest movements. In the Russian context, scholars altered existing theories or developed innovative frameworks to account for the effect of new variables, including social networks, state-sponsored mobilization, the influence of international actors, and new media platforms on protest participation. Importantly, Russianists relaxed core assumptions about the effects of these variables on groups to identify differential effects of factors on individual protest activists. Testing new theories required innovative methods of data collection. Informed by deep regional knowledge, Russian studies scholars relied on focus groups, network analysis, onsite surveys, list experiments, and other research tools to expand their capacity to test competing theories. As a whole, this body of work not only advanced our understanding of Russia, it also contributed to more complete theories of protest in authoritarian states.