



## EXPLAINING URBAN PROTEST IN ILLIBERAL REGIMES: An Emphasis on Russia

by Regina Smyth



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For the past decade, the study of societal development contemporary autocracy has largely focused on two dynamics: the drivers of individual-level regime support and participation in large-scale protest events, or urban revolutions. These approaches overlook the near-universal rise in small-scale collective action—or urban movements—aimed at rectifying local government policy failures or providing public goods. This new work refocusing attention on building block or precursors of social organization and movement formation, constitutes a new and challenging focus of research in comparative politics. By ignoring these actions, political scientists are missing a key mechanism of societal change in illiberal or transitional regimes. Studying contemporary urban activism requires theoretical innovation and data collection. These efforts should link social movement theory, urban activism, and social theory across disciplines to explore how individuals who lack experience, language frames, or repertoires of action come to see politics as relevant for their everyday lives and identities.

In this essay, I consider urban activism in the post-Soviet space, although the framework is adaptable to local protest in small towns and villages. Defined as grassroots movements

that are neither formalized nor institutionalized (Castells 1983), local and regional protests continue to increase across post-Communist states such as Poland, Romania, Kazakhstan and Russia, regardless of regime type. While much of the work on urban activism has developed with the confines of urban studies and ethnographic work in anthropology, geography and sociology, the challenge of explaining collective action in authoritarian urban contexts presents an interesting puzzle for political scientists (see Jacobsson 2015). These studies focus on what many participants call non-political activism: actions taken to redress concerns of everyday life without challenging existing structures or leaders. This distinction explains that the context and model of mobilization – and not the actions – often, but not always, deal with contesting locally defined grievances, resource allocations and economic, cultural, and political policies and decisions. Urban actions address suddenly imposed grievances that disrupt everyday life, social structures, or meanings, such as plans to revise local schools, close a beloved park, or allow infill construction in a neighborhood.

The goal of this essay is to highlight new theoretical innovation and data collection that define



a research program which explains the emergence of activism among disengaged or non-political citizens of illiberal states. Using simple game theoretic models of coordination, I distinguish between collective action (or political protest) where high costs of engagement make free-riding or non-engagement a dominant strategy, and coordination (non-political protest) in which the relatively low (or nonexistent) costs of participation and multiple equilibria provide a very different challenge to mobilization. These games provide some insight into patterns of activism, the effect of authoritarian responses, and the distinctions between political and non-political action.

### Why Urban Mobilization?

The legacy of modernization theory concentrated attention on urban centers as engines for social, economic and political change. Urbanization, industrialization and wealth accumulation, together with education, provided a structural framework for the development of democracy and a shift in social values. The urban middle class provided ballast against the inequality desired by the wealthy and the redistribution demands of the poor to sustain democracy development. Urban citizens not only had greater resources, but they also a variety of grievances including construction and infill, land use, transport, service provision and historic preservation. These demands arose because of the level of services and complexity of everyday life that mark urban life. They also inevitably shaped expectations about regime responsiveness and effectiveness.

Interdisciplinary studies of urban activism catalogue the structural mechanisms that make large cities the likely centers of collective action

(Wallace 2013). In post-communist states, urban centers are the hub of neoliberal development creating new inequalities and grievances, and demands for services. Development also attracts educated, engaged, and resource-rich residents. Population density increases communication and information transmission. Finally, urban spaces are imbued with meaning and linked to personal histories and family narratives (Sun and Huang 2020, Tilly 2000). These spaces provide opportunity for repertoire innovation to gain popular and state attention.

In East-Central Europe and the Baltic states, urban movements focus on local actions designed to prioritize local preferences for housing, bike paths, historic and environmental protection over European Union imposed economic development (Ekiert and Kubik 2014). These actions, called non-political protest by those who engage in it, focus on solving collective problems within the context of everyday experience. These types of local action include recent Russian protests against toxic garbage incineration that began in the Moscow region. These micro-movements are rarely institutionalized, because they lack resources, hold narrow goals, or prefer to retain a more communitarian, informal focus (Aidukaite and Frolich 2015).

New data collection projects demonstrate that increasing activism poses a significant challenge to Russian leaders. Based on an initiative by the Institute of Collective Action, Kleman, Myrisova and Demidov (2010) showed the increase in grassroots movements, some of which were connected within cities and across the Federation. As discussed in her contribution to the *Newsletter*, Tomila Lankina (see also Lankina and Tertychnaya 2020) refined and expanded a crowd sourcing data project,

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Namarsh (To the March), into the Lankina Russian Protest-Event Dataset (LAruPED). This dataset tracks urban protest between 2007 and 2016. In 2018, Andrei Semenov presented his Contentious Politics in Russia (CPR) dataset, documenting regional protest between 2012 and 2014 at the Indiana University Russian Studies Workshop. All of these sources illustrate the rise in both political and non-political protest in Russia between 2010 and 2019. This model is being replicated in other cases. Dustin Gamza and Pauline Jones have collected event count data of local and regional activism across the Central Asian states between 1991-2016 (except Turkmenistan).

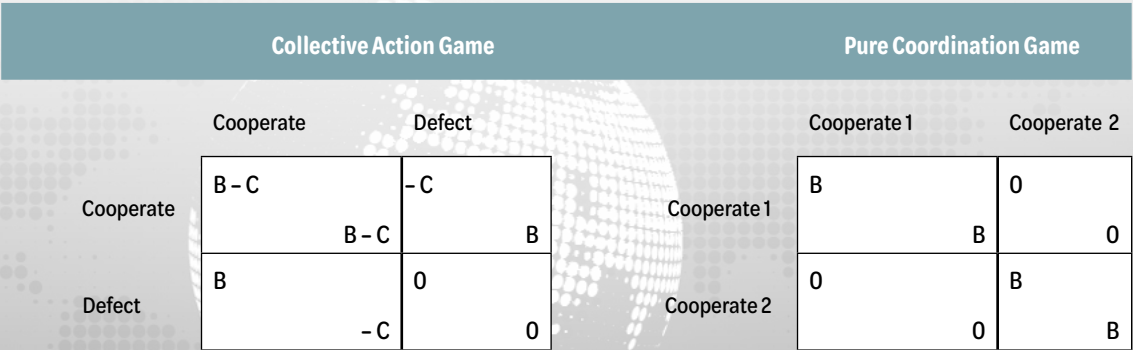
Understanding Variation in Protest Events: Collective Action and Coordination in Autocratic Regimes

Despite the prevalence of non-political urban actions, research and theory development has focused largely on political protest and revolutionary regime change. In the comparative context of post-Communist regions, political protest is illustrated by the colored revolutions begun in Serbia in 2000 and repeated in Georgia, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, and – most recently – Armenia. In Russia, as in many authoritarian states, this distinction between

the everyday actions and anti-regime protests provides a stark dividing line between social understandings of activism. Political activism demands political change: power shifts, institutional reform, or regime or leadership change. To understand the distinction in political and non-political protest, I draw on simple game theoretic models that underscore different mobilization dilemmas and how they can be overcome. These models described in Figure 1 underscore the differences in strategic context—uncertainty, costs and benefits, and –in which citizens make their decisions to join collective action.

The Collective Action game on the left maps the dilemma of political protest that challenges the nature of the regime. The solution to the game (or the obstacle to collection action) focuses on the relative value of costs and benefits, with the assumption that costs are extremely high and no one potential participant can secure the benefits. To forestall protest, authoritarian regimes continue to raise the costs of protest by engaging in a wide range of repressive acts, developing state proxies to carry out repression, and forging new militarized riot troops especially trained to quell protest. Authorities also signal costs through permitting systems that distinguish between acceptable action and illegal actions or to cordon protest actions into remote areas of the city. Because the popular response to repression is uncertain and costly,

Figure 1:  
Cooperation Games:  
Collective Action vs.  
Coordination



authoritarian regimes increasing rely on less violent means of repression and tools to induce self-censorship, including: counter-movements that express “majority” views, disinformation in the form of media reports that misrepresent protest as radical, and smart city technology such as facial recognition software.

These games have one dominant strategy, all defect, predicting limited collective action. As Bo Rothstein (2015) notes, many of the solutions to collective action rely on prior forms of collective action: existing institutions, hierarchies, norms, and even elements of social capital such as trust or reciprocity. For example, existing social and civic groups can promote collective action by applying social or solidary sanctions. History or repeated interaction can provide the information that transforms the interaction as expectations of future action provide incentives for cooperation. This focus on previous experience and structures underscores why large-scale collective action is more difficult in illiberal or transitional societies where these building blocks are underdeveloped and citizens lack experience with activism.

In contrast, the coordination game has two potential equilibria, both predicting cooperation. The dilemma in this game is to understand how potential participants coordinate on the same

action. *Figure 2* unpacks this dilemma. A solution to coordination means resolving two types of uncertainty, an understanding of what the other will do when faced with two strategies or actions to take, and the efficacy of each of these actions. As *Figure 2* shows, potential participants need to understand which game they are playing, defined by the best strategy to achieve shared goals.

A good example of a similar dilemma is illustrated by a common challenge in rapidly changing post-Soviet cities. If a construction company has decided to tear down a historic building or develop a beloved park, communities members agree they should act. Yet, they are conflicted over how to act: should the community block the entrance of the potential construction site (*Game 1*) or petition political authorities to intervene and limit development (*Game 2*). Importantly, the solutions common to collective action (such as iteration) may not work to solve coordination dilemmas. They also demonstrate the critical role that framing theory plays in generating coordination (Benford and Snow 2000). Trusted leaders can define the most efficacious action, prompting coordination on that strategy. Similarly, local ties can foster the creation of common knowledge that provides information about societal preferences and the expectations of other behaviors (Chwe 2013).

**Figure 2:**  
Coordination and  
Uncertainty

|             |             | Game 1<br>(prob = p) |             | Game 2<br>(prob = 1 - p) |             |
|-------------|-------------|----------------------|-------------|--------------------------|-------------|
|             |             | Cooperate 1          | Cooperate 2 | Cooperate 1              | Cooperate 2 |
| Cooperate 1 | Cooperate 1 | B                    | 0           | 0                        | 0           |
|             |             | 0                    | 0           | 0                        | 0           |
| Cooperate 2 | Cooperate 2 | 0                    | 0           | 0                        | B           |
|             |             | 0                    | 0           | 0                        | B           |



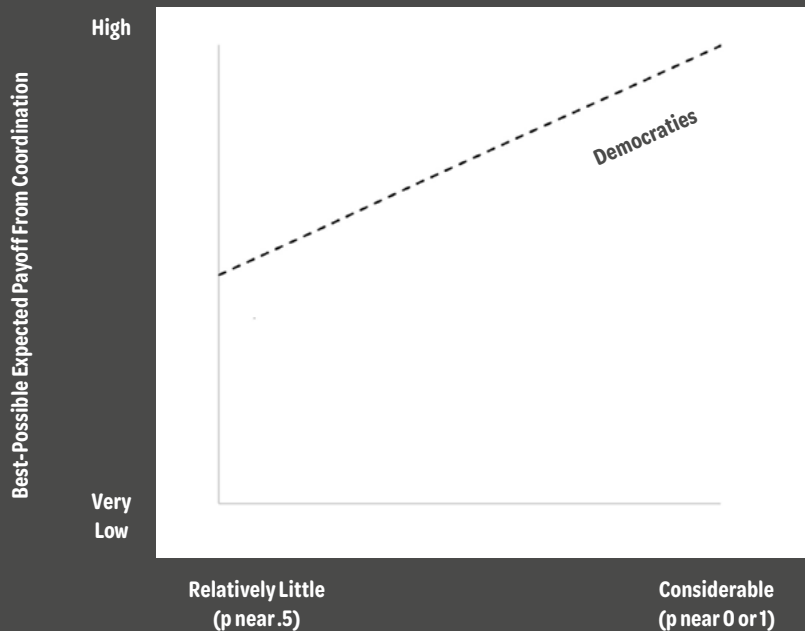
**Figure 3:**  
Combined Coordination  
Game

|             | Cooperate 1  | Cooperate 2      |
|-------------|--------------|------------------|
| Cooperate 1 | (p)B<br>(p)B | 0<br>0           |
| Cooperate 2 | 0<br>0       | (1-p)B<br>(1-p)B |

As I demonstrate below, this model is consistent with the nature of grassroots urban action in Russia where local ties, shared ideas and history, and everyday life disruptions can provide important information about social preferences.

Thinking about a factor (p) such as the information about strategies available to make claims on government defines the likelihood that urban residents will choose strategy 1 or 2. The choice is determined in part by shared agreement that the strategy will work. This possibility is illustrated in *Figure 3*.

**Figure 4:**  
Uncertainty and  
Coordination



As the level of information about the efficacy of protest increases so does the probability of coordination on a single strategy. For the purposes of this analysis, we can think of  $p$  as a function of regime type. In democracies, open opportunity structures, potential partners, and well-defined paths for social input in government define strategies of engagement, although some uncertainty remains. In contrast, in illiberal contexts many factors obscure both the creation of common knowledge and the understanding of the efficacy of different strategies. The blurred boundaries between the regime and other elite actors, the prevalence of informality instead of institutions, and variation across different levels, branches, and regions, all obscure information about the range of possible strategies and their likelihood of success.

*Figure 4* demonstrates this relationship. Complete uncertainty, defined as a .5 probability that either 1 or 2 is a winning strategy, diminishes the likelihood of protest. This situation describes hybrid and autocratic regimes with poorly defined formal institutions. It also demonstrates how regime signals, such as granting protest permissions or announcing their interests in social demands articulated at an action, can shape actions by pushing activists toward or away from particular strategies. Finally, state response to past actions provide a strong indication of future responses, illustrating the potential subsequent action.

While very simple, these theoretic constructs can define the challenges inherent in different collective action dilemmas. They also explain why some actions can emerge at the local level, even in the context of disengaged publics. Finally, the models provide insight into the potential reciprocal links between the two types of protest and how the boundaries between the

might be breached to cause seemingly spontaneous challenges to regime stability.

### The Political Science Focus: Post-Election Protest and Regime Change

The study of Color Revolutions, Arab Spring, and Occupy Central Movement in Hong Kong reinvigorated the focus on individual-level mobilization in comparative politics. These types of large-scale protests aim to redress electoral falsification or governmental reforms that are thinly veiled attempts to maintain or consolidate political power. Both types of events are collective action problems, a class of political problem in which costly participation undermines the provision of the social good: a new election or a new policy framework, or even a new regime. Consistent with the social movement studies of mobilization this work largely stresses the role of organization, leadership, and other structural factors on individual participation.

The debate around the causes and consequences of political mobilization in the color revolutions has focused on the role of organization on the transformation individual-level beliefs and commitment to political change. Valerie Bunce and Sharon Wolchik (2010) explore the role of youth organization on campaign activity on popular expectations in electoral revolutions. By engaging Ukrainians through an electoral model of revolution that shapes popular expectations, activists can mobilize largely disengaged citizens. In Russia in 2011-2012, Semenov, Lobanova and Zavadskaya (2016) show that marginalized opposition parties can play a role in protest mobilization.

In contrast, Mark Beissinger (2013) concludes that the lack of permanent mobilizing structures – often found in peasant revolutions such

as Vietnam – was absent in Ukraine's Orange Revolution. Individual-level analysis suggests that the nationalist, ethnic identity that sparked mobilization is best characterized as a distinct type of "urban revolution" and that this type of mobilization lacks the long-term organizational and ideational infrastructure to sustain political engagement and produce future activism. My own study of the linkages between participation in 2004 and 2014 suggest differentiation among the pathways to protest engagement and lessons learned from past activism. Using unique survey data, I find that some Orange Revolution participants did acquire activist or communitarian identities that prompted re-engagement in the 2014 Revolution of Dignity.

In the Russian FFE protests, much of the debate centered, not on the presence or absence of structure, but on the types of structure that prompted participation. Survey data provides evidence of micro-mobilization through factors such as personal networks, politicized internet networks, and campaign activity (Smyth and Oates 2016, Smyth forthcoming 2020). For some activists, these structures created direct contact and invitations to join the movement and provided different paths to activism—through new media, organizational affiliation or affinity, or personal networks of close friends, family, and co-workers. Each of these factors shape different pathways to action as protest becomes an accepted activity to redress concrete grievances.

Important new data collection strategies facilitate new studies of individual-level mobilization in illiberal contexts. During the 2004 Orange Revolution, innovative polling data drawn from the protest encampment by the Kiev International Institute of Sociology provided a means of testing individual theories of partici-



pation. Scholars and research centers replicated the methodology in Russia's 2011-2012 For Free Elections protest cycle (Smyth forthcoming 2020), in Ukraine during the 2014 Revolution of Dignity (Onuch 2014), and in numerous studies of the 2012 Occupy Central Movement and in 2019 protest in Hong Kong. My own (2018) survey of participants in the Revolution of Dignity events built on these studies, over-sampling participants using a screening question in order to ensure an adequate sample to analyze individual-level variation in participation decisions.

Studies based on these data provide significant insights into political mobilization. First, structure does shape mobilization for some, but not all participants and may well play auxiliary roles such as producing credible leadership, frames, and activist identities. Under some conditions, these factors can transform collective action into coordination. Joshua Tucker (2007) makes this argument in his characterization of post-election protest as a focal point designed to redress grievances. In an unpublished paper with John Hulse (2009), I found that leadership, defined in terms of the trust differential could transform collective action into an assurance game. In this context, high trust in the opposition leader and low trust in the incumbent elevated the opposition leader, making him the guarantor in an assurance game, and resolving uncertainty about which strategy would be most efficacious. We confirmed the theory using individual-level KIIS data from the Orange Revolution.

What is missing in these analyses is the role of previous experiences in apolitical protest, or localized grassroots actions that redress the concerns of everyday life. A growing literature in Russia suggests that these informal actions,

solved through coordination, provide a foundation to solve political collective action problems and spark national mobilization.

### **Mobilizing from Scratch: Non-Political Protest**

The work on non-political mobilization, creating activists from scratch, begins with the observation of the apolitical nature of society in illiberal regimes. Importantly, studies show that apolitical is not the same as apathetic or uninterested. In fact, much – but not all – of what participants consider apolitical protest focuses on core political issues, such as the assertion of rights, redistribution, or policy change. As Nina Eliasoph (1997) argues, in the culture of political avoidance the concept of non-political action marks a difference in the scope of social demands. What is important is to understand the context in which residents come to experience and act on shared feelings of engagement. Zhuravlev, Savelyeva, and Erpyleva (2019) argue that apoliticism is a set of practices that facilitate collective action in everyday life, which also bounds its scope.

Karine Clément pioneered the study of urban activism in Russia, focusing on the transformation among disengaged citizens, the ordinary people, into activists. Her starting point focuses on the Soviet legacy and a social context in which urban residents have little experience or knowledge of how to engage. Kleman (Clément), Demidov and Mirysova (2010) (see also Clément 2009; 2015a; and 2015b) relied on Thévenot's (2013) concept of "regimes of engagement" to show how daily interactions within a community, through local micro-scale processes, transformed attitudes and action. In a similar vein, Gabowitsch (2016) identified everyday objects—



historic buildings, apartment-building courtyards, parks, and forests in which Russians hunt mushrooms—as part of a grammar of personal affinity around which individuals encounter and respond to state action. Building on these insights, Gladarev (2011) argues that agency occurs when the state intrudes in everyday life and disrupts a shared understanding of reality. In short, non-political action is based a shift in understandings given a violation of the familiar. Juxtaposed with the analysis of coordination games above demonstrates these studies suggest new comparative research to understand the context of non-political activism reduces uncertainty about who will protest and how they will do it.

### From Apolitical To Political: A Model of Political Change?

The importance of non-political protest in Russia has fostered a growing literature on the reciprocal relationship between national protests and local actions (see Clément and Zhelnina 2019). In my own work, I demonstrate that growing experience with non-political actions generated activist identities, on- and off-line networks, and shared grievances facilitated participation against election fraud in the FFE movement (Smyth 2020). Subsequently, FFE movement increased local actions. Based on impressive ethnographic work and interdisciplinary research frameworks, these studies show that the FFE mobilization transformed of citizens' understanding of electoral competition as a substantive concern in their daily lives

and an expression of community that fostered new actions (Bikbov 2012, Gabowitsch 2017).

Consistent with a foundational paper by McAdam and Tarrow (2010), both types of protest also influence other types of political participation. My work with Irina Soboleva (2016) on Alexei Navalny's 2013 Moscow mayoral campaign shows how the resources drawn from FFE—strategies, frames, and activists—transformed the contest. Similarly, Andrei Semenov (2020) explores three recent cases of collective action in Russia, concluding that these more recent actions are rely on more complex infrastructure including leadership, alliances with governmental and systemic actors, and clearly defined legal claims. Dollbaum, Semenov, and Sirotkina (2018) show that the organizational mobilization of young people within Alexei Navalny's presidential campaign did not succeed as an electoral vehicle but did create a new generation of regional activists.

These studies reveal a pattern of development that not only transforms society and builds capacity but also changes how the state responds to popular challenges (see Morris, Semenov, Smyth forthcoming 2021). Viewed in the context of theories of authoritarian responsiveness or patterns of resource distributions, this type of protest often politicizes participants, shifting their focus on the cost of autocratic rule. It may also suggest a different kind of evolutionary model in which social capacity to makes demands on government increases and creates pressure for state structures evolve to respond to citizens' demands. ●





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