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Don't Put Belarus in the Middle:

The West Needs to Balance the Interests of Moscow and Minsk

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For the past two months, Belarus has seized headlines in the West. A rigged presidential election followed by mass protests prompted commentators throughout western Europe and the United States to predict the early demise of Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, often reviled as “the last dictator in Europe.” But Russian political support and promises of security assistance have helped Lukashenko hold on to power. Instead of a revolution, the situation has become a prolonged standoff.

As the unrest drags on, Western countries need to find a way to promote democratic progress in Belarus without provoking a counterproductive [Russian response](#). A misstep on the part of the United States or others could transform the country into a zone of geopolitical confrontation. Such an outcome would harm Western interests, European security, and the people of Belarus.

To avoid such a scenario, the United States and the European Union must base their policies on a clear-eyed assessment of the protest movement’s weaknesses and Moscow’s strengths. They should seek a middle-ground solution that precipitates Lukashenko’s departure and acknowledges Russia’s close ties to the country. At the same time, they should gradually normalize relations in order to slowly create better conditions for future democratic progress. Such a policy would

recognize the Belarusian protesters' anger at the status quo, prevent the country from becoming a zone of great-power contestation, and reduce the risk of a large-scale Russian intervention that would close the path to reform.

Ground-level truths

As the protest movement in Belarus gained momentum throughout the month of August, many analysts jumped to the conclusion that Lukashenko's days were numbered. Those predictions were premature. As impressive as the demonstrations might be, the opposition lacks the strength to compel Lukashenko to step down or agree to new elections. His main rival, Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, has fled to Lithuania. As a political novice (she entered the campaign only after the arrest of her husband, a declared candidate), she serves as a symbol of the protest but lacks the skills to lead it.

Tikhanovskaya has acknowledged the limitations of her role and established a Coordination Council, which was initially tasked with facilitating a peaceful transfer of power away from Lukashenko. The government reacted immediately, however, proclaiming the council illegal and opening criminal cases against its members. Most of its leading members are now under arrest or have fled the country. As a result, the body has provided little in the way of leadership. Activists organize the enormous anti-Lukashenko demonstrations in Minsk and elsewhere on Sundays using the social media platform Telegram, and the council does not coordinate their activities. Meanwhile, the council has had difficulty expanding the grassroots opposition beyond its original base of mainly young, urban protesters; it has, for example, failed to convert support among workers at state-owned factories into a nationwide strike that could weaken a core Lukashenko constituency. Moreover, the council has already ratcheted down its demands: instead of calling for Lukashenko to step aside, it now [speaks](#) more vaguely about the need to "organize the process of overcoming the political crisis and ensure social cohesion."

For his part, Lukashenko is weaker than ever before, but he has still managed to maintain popular support in rural areas and small towns and among older generations of Belarusians. The governing elite, including most of those in the security services, has also remained overwhelmingly loyal. The result is a stalemate with no resolution in sight.

Russia's stake

Lukashenko appealed to Russian President Vladimir Putin for security assistance when the protests reached their height. Putin was primed to respond: the Russian leader views the "color revolutions" that have overthrown Kremlin-friendly governments elsewhere in the region as Western assaults on Moscow's sphere of influence. He has made clear that he will do whatever it takes to ensure that Belarus, which Moscow views as a strategic buffer against its Western rivals,

remains in Russia's orbit. To underscore the point, Putin publicly received Lukashenko in Sochi, approved a \$1.5 billion loan to ease Minsk's debt burden, and [announced](#) that he had "set up a certain police reserve" that he could deploy if the situation in Belarus "gets out of control." He has also made clear in public and in private conversations with German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron that Moscow will not tolerate any Western interference in Belarus.

Still, Moscow's support for Lukashenko is far from unconditional. The Belarusian strongman has been a difficult partner, repeatedly thwarting Russian attempts to tighten economic and political ties. Just before the election, Lukashenko [arrested](#) more than 30 Russian mercenaries employed by a private military company close to the Kremlin on charges of planning a coup. (He changed his mind quickly and released them once the protests began). The Kremlin might not oppose Lukashenko's eventual departure, given this mixed record—it could even facilitate it—as long as Belarus remains firmly within Russia's sphere of influence and the transition does not appear to be the result of popular or Western pressure.

The West's choices

Given the vulnerability of Belarus's opposition and Russia's need to keep the country in its orbit, countries like France, Germany, and the United States will have to walk a political tightrope. They need to pressure the Belarusian government to stop the violence and negotiate a peaceful end to the unrest, but at the same time they must avoid an open conflict with Moscow.

They can start by acknowledging the nature of the protests. The Belarusian opposition is [invested in domestic issues](#), not geopolitics, and it does not want to become a pawn in anyone's anti-Russian struggle. Indeed, the protesters understand that Moscow is economically and politically central to their country. Belarus depends on Russia as both a market for goods and a supplier of vital resources, such as energy. Neither the protests nor Western intervention will change that relationship.

Potential Western backers need to respect this dynamic and take care to avoid turning the country into a battleground. They can begin by making clear to everyone—including the Belarusian government and the opposition, as well as Moscow—that their absolute priority is to prevent any further violence, no matter how the domestic political situation evolves.

Calling for a peaceful resolution of the crisis, however, will not be enough. The United States and the European Union should actively seek to facilitate such an outcome through patient, quiet, diplomatic engagement with Moscow, because the Kremlin still holds the key to Lukashenko's fate. They should offer sanctions relief in return for a settlement that puts an end to human rights

violations and advances political accountability. Doing so would position the West to play a larger economic role and help create an opening for democratic progress without inflaming Russian fears of a Western power grab.

But while Western countries should avoid stoking conflict, they must also engage Belarus directly, and not imagine that they can do so merely through the Kremlin. When the current crisis broke out, the U.S. Senate was in the process of confirming a new ambassador to Belarus. Some senators now argue that filling the position under the current conditions would legitimize Lukashenko's crackdown. Leaving the post empty, however, sends a far worse signal to Belarusian society—that the United States is interested in discussing the country's issues only with Moscow. Washington should confirm an ambassador to Belarus as soon as possible, and the new appointee should balance official government engagement with active outreach to the opposition.

A post-Lukashenko Belarus, with close ties to Moscow but an improved relationship with the West, remains a possible medium-term outcome of the current crisis. It might not be the one many in the West had hoped for, but it is still a good alternative and perhaps the best option in the current climate. Well-crafted policy could make it a reality. If the West tries to force an aggressive solution, however, the outcome could be disastrous, most of all for the brave people of Belarus.

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