Commentary
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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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**Summary**

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.

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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.

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