

Europe's Last Dictator

Clara Thorson

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Crowds gather in Minsk, Belarus to protest the controversial election.

By: Clara Thorson

The small European country of Belarus—a neighbor to Russia and former member of the Soviet bloc—has been rocked by [protests](#) and political upheaval. Ever since the country's national election on August ninth, a burgeoning opposition movement has been calling for the removal of long-time president and widely-labelled dictator, Alexander Lukashenko. The calls for Lukashenko's removal threaten to compromise Russian President Vladimir Putin's hold over the region, leaving the world wondering whether or not Putin will make a move to support the dictator next door. The tenuous relationship between the two leaders and their countries can best be understood by examining geopolitical codes.

Countries and their administrations are like actors on a world stage, each determining how they will interact with the rest of the world. These calculations include determining who current allies are, as well as identifying potential alliances that could be made in the future. We refer to these assessments as [geopolitical codes](#), and use them to explain a country's interactions with the global neighborhood. In this case, Belarus and Russia have already been longtime allies ever since the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991. The two countries share a distaste for Western influence, independent journalism, and complete democracy. As remnants of Communism have eroded over the decades, Russia has given Belarus [incentives](#)—like subsidies on oil exports—to sweeten the alliance. Now that Lukashenko has been granted another term as president following what is widely considered a rigged election, protestors have been met with threats of

deportation and even death by the Belarusian government. This places the Kremlin in a difficult position. Belarus may not be a very powerful ally; however, if a democratic revolution were to overthrow the proclaimed president, opposition voters in Russia might be tempted to follow suit. The Kremlin wants to continue to have Belarus in its back pocket, and a democratic revolution could jeopardize that. That being said, Putin must be cautious in making any overt steps to support Lukashenko either. Doing so would send the wrong message to Russian citizens, as well as anger much of the Western world. Although Belarus is a valuable buffer state for the Kremlin against Western Europe, Putin must now decide just important it is to have the country under his thumb.

Geopolitical codes not only involve assessing one's allies, but also one's enemies. Tension between the United States and Russia has fomented since the Cold War, and Washington is carefully watching for Putin's next move. The White House has [called](#) on Lukashenko to heed protestors' calls for democracy, and warned the Kremlin not to get involved. The geopolitical code of Belarus is thus at a significant crossroads: remain allies with Putin and maintain a closed government, or yield to protestors and create a new democratic government with U.S. and E.U. alliances. In either case, Belarus will be making a powerful enemy.