Analyses OSW

CENTRE FOR EASTERN STUDIES 10.08.2022 www.osw.waw.pl

Belarus: formation of Tsikhanouskaya's interim cabinet

Kamil Kłysiński

On 9 August, during the 'New Belarus' conference organised in Vilnius on the second anniversary of the outbreak of mass protests against the falsified presidential election results, the Belarusian opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya announced the formation of an interim cabinet under her own leadership. She stated that the term 'government' was deliberately not used, to avoid comparisons to the government under Alyaksandr Lukashenka. The new structure's declared goals included the organisation of free presidential elections and getting Russian troops to withdraw from Belarus. The leader appointed four representatives to the body: Lt. Col. Valery Sakashchik (former commander of the elite 38th Separate Guards Air Assault Brigade and an entrepreneur, who will be responsible for defence policy and the military), Valery Kovalevsky (a former diplomat and one of Tsikhanouskaya's advisors: he will be in charge of foreign policy), Lt. Col. Alyaksandr Azarau (a former Interior Ministry officer and coordinator of ByPol, the association of ex-officers of Belarusian law enforcement agencies: he will be responsible for public order and security), and Paval Latushka (chairman of the National Anti-Crisis Management: he will be responsible for the transition of power). By the end of September, the cabinet should be expanded to include other posts related to different spheres, including the economy.

Commentary

- The formation of the cabinet, which is actually a government in exile, was first announced by Tsikhanouskaya back on 24 February in response to the Russian aggression against Ukraine. The failure to implement this decision has triggered a wave of harsh criticism in recent months from other political exile leaders, including Latushka and the co-founder of the Pahonia volunteer Belarusian military unit in Ukraine, Vadim Prokopiev, who in July publicly called on the opposition leader to hand over some of her powers (based on her presumed 2020 election victory) to a "strong prime minister". The most radical confrontation with Tsikhanouskaya came from the Forum of Democratic Forces of Belarus, established in May this year. This body, whose leaders include one of Lukashenko's challengers in the 2020 campaign, Valery Tsepkalo and his wife Veranika, have openly challenged her leadership. They accuse her of having failed to achieve any results after two years of activity (including bringing about the release of at least some political prisoners), an excessive focus on foreign visits while neglecting to work with social activists at home, a failure to interact with other immigrant centres, avoiding expressing more support for Ukraine, and failing to unequivocally condemn Russia as the aggressor. There was also widespread criticism of the allegedly non-transparent management of funds provided by Western donors. The allegations outlined above were

also repeated at the New Belarus conference in Vilnius.

- The resentment towards Tsikhanouskaya, which has been growing for months, is a consequence of the deepening disillusionment and fatigue among political émigrés at the political stagnation and public apathy in Belarus. As the activists become increasingly disconnected from realities on the ground, and prove themselves incapable of changing the situation in the country, they are coming to focus on internal conflicts, mutual accusations of incompetence, and competing for activists and financial support from donors. The war in Ukraine, and in particular the complicity in it of the Lukashenko regime, has proved to be a significant catalyst for the rise in tensions. The reluctance to explicitly condemn the Kremlin's policies and the small scale of aid initiatives in favour of Ukraine have become some of the main causes of criticism – particularly from the Forum, whose leaders have consistently accused Tsikhanouskaya of being too conciliatory, and therefore unable to deal with the Kremlin situation. At the same time, accusations have been made that the lack of a clear narrative from the leader and her advisors with regard to the war is resulting in the increasingly acute decline in the importance of Belarus on the Western agenda.
- For the time being, the core cabinet has a mandate for six months; approval of the longer-term nominees will require the approval of the opposition's collective body, the Coordination Council. The inauguration of this body is a pre-emptive step which has been forced upon Tsikhanousaya by large-scale criticism, and thus should be understood as an attempt at a new opening in the political strategy of democratic movement. Indeed, the months-long delay in forming the interim government has exposed the deep crisis in Tsikhanouskaya's entourage: for many months she has been unable to take responsibility for constructing alternative power structures to Lukashenko. By forming the cabinet, she is attempting to defuse the accumulated tensions and rebuild her position as leader of the opposition. This will probably be helped by the appointment of people mostly from outside her immediate circle as quasi-ministers (of the four nominees, only Kovalevsky represents her office). In particular, the appointment of Latushka, who has made no secret of his ambitions to leadership, is expected to stabilise relations between the two émigré centres, which have not been the best in recent times.
- It is noteworthy that the Forum of Democratic Forces of Belarus was completely disregarded when filling the posts. This is most likely due to a desire to marginalise extremely critical circles. Valeria Tsepkalo, who was present at the Vilnius conference on behalf of the Forum, aggressively attacked both Tsikhanouskaya herself and her advisors, as well as the Belarusian independent media, which she claims are boycotting her organisation's initiatives. At the same time, however, she avoided making any binding declarations on the possibility of cooperation, instead announcing her own strategy. In this situation, further disputes within the political émigrés should be expected.
- Although the creation of the cabinet should be seen as the right move from a PR point of view, it is still unclear what the real meaning of this ad hoc, hurried decision is. It has not been underpinned by a comprehensive strategy covering both foreign policy and attitudes towards Russia, or by any signs of working with domestic opposition circles and the Belarusian public. Nor is it clear from the cabinet members' first statements that they have full knowledge of the scope and division of their competences, which further

indicates the provisional nature of this structure. The position of Tsikhanouskaya's office in the new set-up is also unclear, especially as the leader's influential – and also most severely criticised – advisor Franak Viachorka has not been included in the body. It is also unclear what form the currently Coordination Council (the opposition's collegiate body, established in Minsk back in August 2020) will eventually take. Ultimately, according to declarations made by Tsikhanouskaya and her entourage, the cabinet will be transformed into a quasi-parliament in exile.