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Distrust and reticence. Kyiv on Tsikhanouskaya's offer of an alliance

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On 10 October, the leader of the Belarusian opposition Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya proposed to President Volodymyr Zelensky that an alliance be formed between Ukraine and a free & democratic Belarus – i.e. the interim cabinet formed under Tsikhanouskaya's leadership in August this year. At the same time, she declared that Belarus should give up its political, economic and military alliance with Russia, and that Ukraine would win its war against the Russian aggressor. So far, the offer has not met with a high-level reaction from Kyiv. On 12 October Oleksiy Arestovych, an advisor to the Ukrainian presidential office, reacted positively to the Belarusian opposition leader's appeal, while at the same time criticising the Ukrainian political class for "unfairly" holding Belarusians responsible for the pro-Russian policy of Alyaksandr Lukashenka. However the chairman of the Ukrainian parliament's foreign affairs committee and member of the Servant of the Nation party Oleksandr Merezhko, together with another deputy from the same party Bohdan Yaremenko, stated that Ukraine could not recognise Tsikhanouskaya and her cabinet because the stance of the Belarusian opposition towards Russia remains unclear (including its failure to condemn Russia as a terrorist state); they also questioned the credibility of "certain people within her entourage". Both politicians suggested that the only formation the Ukrainian authorities could trust was the Kastus Kalinouski Regiment, a volunteer unit made up of Belarusians fighting in the ranks of the Ukrainian Armed Forces.

Commentary

- Tsikhanouskaya's statement about the need to break ties with Russia and form an alliance with Kyiv is her first such unequivocal statement towards Moscow and the attack on Ukraine. Until now, the leader of the Belarusian opposition and those close to her have avoided any firm condemnation of the Kremlin, due to fear of losing support from the largely pro-Russian population of Belarus (although at the same time, according to independent opinion polls, only a very small percentage of the population support the Belarusian army's participation in the military operations). This radicalisation of the narrative is a result of both Russia's increasing brutality and the growing criticism from numerous Belarusian political émigrés who have accused Tsikhanouskaya of passivity in the face of Minsk's complicity in the Russian aggression. By clearly dissociating herself from the Kremlin, she is seeking to increase her own political credibility.
- The lack of response from any senior Ukrainian government figures to Tsikhanouskaya's proposal confirms Kyiv's continuing distrust of her and her entourage, as well as the lack

of a coherent political line towards the Belarusian opposition. One factor behind this attitude is a statement Tsikhanouskaya made during the 2020 presidential campaign, when she called Crimea “de facto Russian”, which she walked back on only several months later. Her ambiguous stance after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine on 24 February has also been criticised. Kyiv’s emphasis on the role of the Kalinouski Regiment, which is engaged in armed fighting against Russia in Ukraine, demonstrates that it does not perceive the Belarusian émigré community – which is devoid of any real influence on the situation in the country, and remains internally divided – as a credible partner.