

Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's first official visit to Kyiv

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On 25 May, Belarusian opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya arrived in Kyiv for a two-day official visit at the personal invitation of President Volodymyr Zelensky. During a joint press conference with Ukrainian Foreign Minister Andrii Sybiha, she emphasised that "Ukraine's victory in the war with Russia will also open the way to freedom for Belarus". At the same time, she acknowledged that the regime in Minsk had made Belarus complicit in Russia's aggression, while stressing that Alyaksandr Lukashenka does not represent the Belarusian people. Sybiha ruled out the possibility of lifting sanctions against Belarus's dictator and stated that Ukraine would consider imposing additional measures. He also expressed support for including Belarusian democratic forces in the Lublin Triangle – comprising Poland, Lithuania and Ukraine – as representatives of Belarus. During his meeting with Tsikhanouskaya, Zelensky stressed that Russia is increasingly trying to draw Belarus into the war against Ukraine. He expressed support for the Belarusian people's efforts to free themselves from Russian influence and voiced confidence that the two countries would rebuild good-neighbourly relations based on genuine independence from the Kremlin.

Tsikhanouskaya's reception in Kyiv confirms a fundamental shift in Ukraine's policy towards Belarus, aimed at convincing the international community of the need to maintain sanctions against Minsk, while also pressuring Lukashenka to reassess his relationship with Moscow. For the Belarusian opposition leader and the structures under her control, Ukraine's new approach amounts to a form of legitimisation through the de facto recognition of her political role.

Commentary

- **Tsikhanouskaya's meeting with President Zelensky represents a gesture of Ukraine's recognition of her Transitional Cabinet as a fully-fledged partner.** The Ukrainian leader's remark that the meeting between the presidents of Ukraine and Belarus proposed by Lukashenka a few days earlier had effectively materialised in the form of Tsikhanouskaya's visit amounts to a delegitimisation of the Belarusian dictator as a representative of the Belarusian people. This marks another step in Ukraine's shift since January this year towards a tougher stance on Lukashenka, including further reductions in contacts with the Belarusian administration (see: '[Sanctions against Lukashenka. A shift in Ukraine's policy towards Belarus](#)').
- **The meeting with the Belarusian opposition leader has allowed Ukraine to reinforce its narrative regarding the oppressive nature of the Lukashenka regime and its complicity**

in Russia's aggression. From this perspective, Ukraine has used its contacts with Tsikhanouskaya as an instrument to counter attempts by the West, above all the United States, to partially normalise relations with Lukashenka (see: ['Eased sanctions for the release of 123 prisoners as US–Belarus relations continue to thaw'](#)). This engagement also signals a more assertive stance by Kyiv towards Washington, which had reportedly urged Ukrainian decision-makers to ease Belarus's isolation, particularly through the opening of a transit corridor via Odesa for Belarusian potash exports. Ukraine's uncompromising position is further reflected in the recent hardening of its rhetoric towards Belarus, including references to the possibility of a pre-emptive strike against its neighbour in order to prevent its direct participation in the assault on Ukraine.

- **For Tsikhanouskaya, the visit represents a major reputational success and strengthens her standing within the Belarusian opposition.** The marked intensification of contacts with Ukraine since January this year, culminating in the visit to Kyiv – a goal her political camp had pursued since 2020 – lends greater international legitimacy to the leader of the Belarusian democratic forces. Having faced accusations in recent years – primarily from rival factions within the émigré community – of lacking political standing and failing to maintain strong ties with compatriots inside Belarus, Tsikhanouskaya can now position herself as a partner of Belarus's southern neighbour, which may play an influential role in shaping developments in Eastern Europe after the end of the war.
- **The regime in Minsk appears clearly unsettled by Ukraine's new policy, viewing it as a development that could deepen its regional isolation.** Referring to Belarusian-Ukrainian relations, on 21 May Lukashenka appealed to Zelensky to arrange a meeting "at any time and in any place to resolve any misunderstandings". Although the Belarusian government has not commented directly on Tsikhanouskaya's visit, its statements have conveyed disappointment over the reduction in contacts with Ukraine and the hardening of its rhetoric. This further weakens Lukashenka's international position by undermining his efforts to sustain the claim that Belarus can serve as a neutral mediator between Russia and Ukraine.