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A directive from the Government of the Russian Federation on introducing temporary restrictions on the entry of foreign citizens to the Russian Federation, including citizens of the Republic of Belarus, has been drafted following the decisions by President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin on countering the further spread of the coronavirus infection.

Belarus was notified about the planned measures in a timely manner during a telephone conversation between Prime Minister of the Russian Federation Mikhail Mishustin and Prime Minister of the Republic of Belarus Sergei Roumas on March 15, 2020. The head of the Belarusian cabinet was told that restrictions on entry to the Russian Federation would not apply to certain categories of people, including commercial drivers.

In addition, the draft directive of the Government of the Russian Federation provides for exceptions for some categories of people working in Russia: employees of diplomatic missions and consular offices, members of official delegations, aircraft, ship and boat crews, and international railway train crews, as well as persons that permanently reside in the Russian Federation or those planning to attend the funeral of a close relative.

It was emphasised during the above telephone conversation that the decisions of the Government of the Russian Federation are being made in strict compliance with the recommendations of the World Health Organisation (WHO), that they are objective and scientifically substantiated.

In this context, statements by the leaders of the Republic of Belarus on developments in the spread of the new coronavirus infection sound perplexing to the Government of the Russian Federation. Thus, a statement on the number of infected persons suggests that, based on population, the situation in Belarus is more serious than in Russia. The assertion that “all of Russia is ablaze in coronavirus” does not reflect reality.

Moreover, Belarus was informed about this issue in advance in order to find out its position and coordinate joint measures of response to the coronavirus infection or receive reciprocal proposals in connection with the decisions that were being drafted. Characteristically, no objections were expressed during the telephone conversation between the prime ministers.

We would like to emphasise that the restrictions on entry to the Russian Federation from the territory of the Republic of Belarus are being imposed primarily because the Belarusian government has not taken the appropriate WHO-recommended measures on closing state borders with a view to preventing the spread of the coronavirus from third countries.

It is noteworthy that, under Article 5 of the Agreement between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus on ensuring equal rights for Russian and Belarusian citizens to freedom of movement, the choice of place of temporary or permanent residence in the member states of the Union State, concluded in St Petersburg on January 24, 2006, the rights of citizens of one Party to the agreement on freedom of movement, choice of place of temporary and permanent residence in the other Party may be limited in the manner provided in accordance with the laws of the other Party for the sake of ensuring national security, protecting public order, morality, and its citizens' health, rights and freedoms.

In turn, the Law On the State Border of the Russian Federation, the Federal Law On the Sanitary and Epidemiological Welfare of the Population, and the Federal Law On the Procedure for Exit from the Russian Federation and Entry into the Russian Federation provide the Government of the Russian Federation with the necessary authority to decide on entry restrictions into the Russian Federation.

It is important that the restrictive measures taken by the Russian side are prompted by special circumstances and are only temporary. As for the decisions made in relation to the Republic of Belarus, they are fully based on the principles of respect and openness.

Therefore, it is puzzling that, in the context of an election campaign, Belarusian officials make statements that definitely do not help the development of coordinated measures to jointly counteract the outburst of the coronavirus infection. The Russian side expects its Belarusian partners to take a more constructive position in the interests of preserving the health and epidemiological welfare of the citizens of Belarus and Russia.