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Belarus: Partial border closure

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The Belarusian government has decided to close land border crossings for people wishing to leave the country from 21 December until further notice. The regulation to this effect was issued on 7 December by the government, supplementing the existing restrictions on entry into the country which were introduced on 30 October. The official reason for the new restrictions was the need to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. No date for lifting the restrictions was given; that will be made conditional on the epidemic situation. The government's decision concerns traffic via the country's land checkpoints at the borders with Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Ukraine, and does not include the border with Russia.

The regulation prohibits travel abroad for citizens of the Republic of Belarus, as well as for foreigners with leave to remain permanently or temporarily on its territory. These persons will be unable to leave the country by car, rail and river border crossings or simplified border traffic points. There is no ban on departure through airport border crossings. The ban does not apply to persons with diplomatic and service passports, members of official delegations, or drivers of international road transport.

The restrictions introduced include other exceptions: the death or illness of a relative, the need to receive medical treatment outside the Republic of Belarus, bearing a permit to live in another country, work abroad on the basis of a signed contract, and travel to study. The travel permits related to these categories will only be issued once every six months. The decree of 7 December also introduces additional requirements for foreigners entering Belarus: they will be required to have a negative PCR test result for COVID-19 performed up to three days before crossing the border.

Commentary

- The justification for introducing the restrictions, by the need to combat the spread of the coronavirus, has given the authorities an excuse to limit the mobility of society. The exit ban will not reduce the epidemic's threat in Belarus, and maintaining the freedom to cross the border with Russia may even have a negative impact on the number of new infections.
- Minsk's decision is further proof that a militia-state system is being introduced, which will also increase control over citizens by preventing them from leaving for countries whose policies Lukashenka considers hostile to the regime. The closure of the border proves that the government intends to radically limit the Belarusian people's contacts with anti-regime circles operating abroad, and make it difficult for people who want to find better employment or conduct business activities abroad, including doctors and IT specialists

who have been critical of the regime.

- The restrictions introduced do not affect relations with Russia in matters related to the movement of persons. On 7 December, Lukashenka ratified the agreement on the mutual recognition of visas which was signed on 19 June. It stipulates that holders of a Russian or Belarusian visa will be able to move around the territory of each country. The implementation of the agreement, after the document has been ratified by Russia, will contribute to the harmonisation of both countries' migration policies, including in the area of regulations related to crossing the border of the Republic of Belarus. However, this is just the first step towards the planned creation of a common migration and visa space between Russia and Belarus, as both sides retain the right to conduct an independent visa policy (they do not have to withdraw from the visa-free regimes introduced on their territory), and cooperation in the sphere of migration policy will take place within the framework of ongoing contacts between the relevant services.