The Moscow Times
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Russia Sentences Ukrainian Woman to 12 Years for Balloon Protest

By AFP

June 22, 2024



Kristina Lyubashenko **Alexandra Astakhova / Mediazona**

A Russian military court on Friday sentenced a Ukrainian woman to 12 years in prison for releasing blue-white-blue balloons — the colors of opposition to the Ukraine offensive — over Moscow last year.

Ukrainian citizen Kristina Lyubashenko, 35, was found guilty of taking part in a "terrorist" group and spreading "fake information" about the Russian Armed Forces, the state TASS news agency reported.

Prosecutors said she was acting on the orders of the anti-Kremlin Freedom of Russia Legion, which is banned in Russia.

The Legion, which is composed of Russians who side with Kyiv and oppose Moscow's military offensive against Ukraine, has launched several armed incursions into Russia.

The prosecution said Lyubashenko released the balloons into the sky above the Russian capital and installed speakers at a window in a residential building that blasted out "fake information" on Moscow's Ukraine offensive.

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Independent Russian news site Mediazona quoted Lyubashenko's lawyer as saying she had fled to Switzerland from Ukraine in 2022 — at the start of Russia's full-scale military offensive against her country — and had been given refugee status there.

She had been living in Switzerland with her sick mother, elderly grandfather and two daughters, and had run into financial difficulties, Mediazona quoted lawyer Lyudmila Posmitnaya as saying.

In Switzerland, she met a man who presented himself as a fellow Ukrainian refugee, who lent her money before asking her to go to Moscow, Posmitnaya reportedly said.

The man had initially told her to release yellow and blue balloons, in the colors of the Ukrainian flag.

Lyubashenko had refused at first to install the speakers but the man became threatening and said she would lose custody of her daughters, according to the lawyer.

Mediazona said Lyubashenko told the court in Ukrainian: "I think you all understand how this case came about."

Since the start of the military offensive, Russia has massively cracked down on dissent and handed down harsh sentences to people convicted of acts of sabotage inside the country.

It has also banned publicly sympathizing with Ukraine.

Original url:
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