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Afghan Journalist Denied Asylum in Russia Returns to Kabul

June 26, 2024



Kobra Hassani. **RFE / RL**

An Afghan journalist and feminist activist who fled to Russia more than two years ago due to fears of prosecution by the Taliban has returned to Afghanistan, her lawyer told the Fontanka news outlet on Tuesday.

Kobra Hassani was among a group of 12 Afghan nationals who were detained in St. Petersburg in May 2022 on suspicion of trying to illegally cross into Europe. She applied for asylum late last year, but in January, Russian authorities rejected her request.

The following month, a St. Petersburg court sentenced Hassani to two years in prison for illegally crossing into Russia. The time she spent in pre-trial detention was counted toward that sentence and she was released in May.

According to lawyers and members of the Afghan diaspora in Russia, Hassani flew from Moscow to Kabul on Tuesday, though it was not immediately clear why.

“There were many options to leave, from Albania to Germany. But everything required effort, time, money,” her lawyer Maria Belyaeva told Fontanka, suggesting her client may have decided there was no other option than to return to her home country.

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Hassani, who previously worked as a television journalist in Afghanistan, escaped the Taliban through the Central Asia republic of Tajikistan and initially settled in Ukraine after the militant group came to power in Afghanistan in 2021.

She tried fleeing to Poland after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, but she was instead taken to Russian-controlled territories of the war-torn country and then to Moscow through various intermediaries.

According to her lawyers, Hassani could face the death penalty in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan.

Moscow has banned the Taliban as a terrorist organization, but despite ideological and historical rifts, Russian officials have hosted the group for security talks in recent years.

The state-run TASS news agency reported in April that Russia’s Foreign Ministry was looking into having the Taliban removed from the country’s terrorist list.

Original url:
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