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Russia Builds 4G Network in Afghanistan as Ties With Taliban Deepen

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A U.S.-sanctioned Russian telecom equipment developer installed 4G mobile network systems in Afghanistan last year to provide mobile services for up to 10 million people, the Vedomosti business newspaper reported Thursday.

The work highlights Moscow's deepening ties with the Taliban since the Islamist group returned to power in 2021 following the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan.

The St. Petersburg company Protey's installation of a 4G core network — the central system needed for mobile phones to work — in Afghanistan marks the first time the company has exported its technology abroad, according to Vedomosti.

The core network was developed in cooperation with Russia's state telecom provider Rostelecom and claims to be the first domestic solution that could replace foreign hardware and software.

Protey's moves follow exits by major telecom suppliers like Ericsson and Nokia, and the scaling back of operations by Chinese firms like Huawei and ZTE after the Taliban's return.

The Russian-made core network was installed in 2024 in four of Afghanistan's 34 provinces, said Rostelecom Vice President Alesya Mamchur, without naming the regions. She said the equipment would help provide mobile service for up to 10 million of Afghanistan's approximately 40 million people.

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Protey has been under U.S. sanctions since last year for operating in an economic sector "determined to support Russia's military-industrial base."

On April 17, Russia's Supreme Court removed the Taliban from its list of designated terrorist organizations, where it had been listed since 2003. Although stopping short of formally recognizing the Taliban government, the move reflects the Kremlin's shift toward new regional alliances after its invasion of Ukraine strained its ties with traditional partners.

Russian and Taliban officials have since vowed to switch trade payments to national currencies, build railway lines and rebuild a vital Soviet-built highway that connects Kabul with northern Afghanistan and Central Asia.

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