

42 arrests in Spain, Romania and Portugal for mass pickpocketing



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Authorities in Spain, Romania and Portugal have arrested 42 suspects during an action against an organised group of large-scale pickpockets, coordinated by Eurojust, with the support of Europol. The group, consisting of certain Romanian families, deprived thousands of mainly Spanish victims of watches and jewelry, which were subsequently melted into bars of gold and silver. The estimated profits exceeded EUR 1 million. During the operation, twelve houses were searched and an amount of approximately EUR 41.000 in cash was seized, as well as ten luxury cars and over 400 luxury watches, pieces of jewelry and mobile phones.

The organised criminal group (OCG) initially operated in France and then moved to Germany, Italy and in the last years to Spain. The OCG used the so called 'necklace trick', where under the pretext of asking for help or directions they contacted mainly vulnerable, elderly persons. As a sign of alleged gratitude, they hugged them and at the same moment stole their watches or pieces of jewelry, before escaping in a waiting car. The suspects occasionally used violence when victims tried to resist.

Over the last years, the authorities in Spain received close to 6.000 complaints about the criminal group. Spanish investigators found links with another Romanian clan, based in Spain, who transformed the proceeds of the crime into bars of gold and silver, which were then transported back to Romania. Apart from large-scale theft and pickpocketing, the arrested persons are suspected of money laundering.

Financial investigations, as well as coordinated searches of places, the freezing of assets and seizure of goods were carried out by Romanian investigators as participants in a Joint Investigation Team (JIT), supported by Eurojust. The action day was supported by a coordination centre, set up by Eurojust. Previous to that, three coordination meetings were held at the request of the Spanish authorities. Europol provided analytical information.

The operation was successfully carried out by the Spanish Policia Nacional in cooperation with the Directorate of Investigation of Organized Criminality and Terrorism Offenses of Ialomita in Romania.