

Human trafficking ring dismantled by Spanish and Bulgarian authorities

7 July 2017

A large-scale joint investigation, run by the Spanish and Bulgarian judicial and law enforcement authorities, and supported by Eurojust and Europol, has resulted in the dismantling of an international organised crime group involved in trafficking young Bulgarian women to Spain for the purpose of sexual exploitation. In the coordinated action week between 26 June and 30 June, 34 individuals were arrested (26 in Spain and 8 in Bulgaria), and 13 victims of sexual exploitation were safeguarded.

The criminal group operated in Spain and Bulgaria for at least six years, taking control of the prostitution industry in Torremolinos and Marbella, Spain. They recruited vulnerable women in Bulgaria, transported them to Málaga and forced them to practice prostitution in the Marbella area of Puerto Banús. The gang used violence and threats against the victims and their families. The victims were also forced to steal their clients' cash, credit cards and other valuable objects, sometimes by spiking the clients' drinks. The objects were channelled to local pawnshops linked to the criminal group, and converted into cash, which was used either to purchase high-value cars or transported back to Bulgaria.

The investigation began in 2014, when Spanish authorities detected the existence of a human trafficking group operating in Spain with links to Bulgaria. Given the dimension of the criminal network under investigation and its international character, a joint investigation team (JIT), formed by Spain and Bulgaria, funded by Eurojust and supported by Eurojust and Europol, was set up. The JIT had two Spanish co-leaders, a THB specialised prosecutor and Investigating Judge in Marbella, and a JIT leader from the Bulgarian side. The Bulgarian investigation was led by the Specialized Prosecutors' Office of Bulgaria. The excellent police and judicial cooperation led to the identification of new victims, the roles of the different members of the organisation and their *modus operandi*.

Eurojust and Europol provided support throughout the entire investigation and during the joint actions that took place last week in Spain and Bulgaria. The coordinated actions were prepared at a coordination meeting held at Eurojust in June. On the action day, Europol provided on the spot support by deploying two human trafficking experts to Spain, equipped with a mobile office, allowing real-time intelligence analysis and cross-checking against Europol's databases.

In total, 38 searches were carried out (21 in Málaga, Spain, and 17 in Bulgaria), resulting in the seizure of EUR 50 000 in cash, 12 luxury watches and a significant amount of drugs. Judicial authorities also ordered the seizure of six properties and 18 vehicles, as well as the freezing of numerous bank accounts. Seven EAWs issued by Spain are currently under

execution in Bulgaria and the procedure is pending before the District Court of Pazardzhik.

Further details are available in the [Policia's press release](#) (in ES only).