

Trafficking for sexual exploitation: Bulgarian OCG dismantled

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□An organised crime group (OCG) operating in the Sliven region of Bulgaria was dismantled following Eurojust's coordination of five investigations of trafficking of human beings (THB) for the purpose of sexual exploitation of Bulgarian women to the Netherlands and Belgium, as well as money laundering.

These five investigations resulted in two separate international operations, Operation Palma and Operation Leerdam, and respectively the establishment of two joint investigation teams (JITs), which were set up and coordinated as well as financially supported by Eurojust.

OPERATION PALMA

Operation Palma was initiated by the Dutch authorities in 2013, investigating criminal activity of trafficking of human beings that took place between 2003 and 2010. Following the first coordination meeting at Eurojust in November 2015, the authorities of Bulgaria and the Netherlands set up a JIT in January 2016 to coordinate their investigative efforts. Within the framework of this JIT, between 4 and 11 October 2016, coordinated operations were carried out in Sliven, Bulgaria, and Utrecht and Amsterdam, the Netherlands. Two suspects were detained in Bulgaria, one of them on the basis of an European Arrest Warrant (EAW) issued by Prosecutors Office Utrecht and the other one for money laundering offences of large scale. At the same time in the Netherlands another suspect was arrested. During these coordinated operations a great number of witnesses were questioned in the Netherlands, Belgium and in Bulgaria (in Bulgaria by mixed Bulgarian/Dutch police-teams).

Searches and seizures were conducted in two different towns in Bulgaria. Photos and documents were seized, and the Bulgarian court imposed freezing orders on real estate and vehicle. The Dutch police is preparing a financial report concerning the illegally obtained profits by the main suspect in the Dutch case.

OPERATION LEERDAM

In November 2015, the Bulgarian authorities requested the support of Eurojust in another ongoing Dutch investigation, called Operation Leerdam, for trafficking of Bulgarian women to The Netherlands and Belgium.

Eurojust was instrumental in detecting links between the investigations carried out by the Bulgarian and Dutch authorities within the framework of Operation Palma and Operation Leerdam, and another ongoing investigation in Belgium on sexual exploitation in Antwerp and Brussels of victims of Bulgarian nationality.

In February 2016, Eurojust organised a joint coordination meeting during

which prosecutors, investigators and police officers from Belgium, Bulgaria and the Netherlands in charge of the 5 linked investigations gathered for the first time to discuss and agree on a coordinated approach to dismantle the OCG. The meeting was attended by twenty-five participants, including Europol officials. As a result of the coordination meeting, Belgium, Bulgaria, and the Netherlands set up a new JIT in Operation Leerdam to define and execute a common case strategy to ensure that the actions in one case would not interfere with the investigations in the other case.

In the framework of an international specialized operation, on 27 September 2016, the leader and two members of the OCG were arrested in Amsterdam. In Bulgaria, six other members of the OCG were arrested pursuant to EAWs and subsequently surrendered to the Belgian and Dutch authorities. One person was arrested in Germany based on a EAW issued by the Netherlands. Ten simultaneous searches were carried out in four different towns in Bulgaria. Evidence and documents related to the OCG were found and seized, as well as cash and drugs. Witnesses were questioned in Belgium, Bulgaria and the Netherlands. During all the investigative actions that took place in Bulgaria, members of the JIT from the Netherlands, including the prosecutor supervising the investigation in Utrecht, were present.

Eurojust supported the activities of the national authorities participating in these two separate JITs, including providing both investigation teams with significant logistical and financial assistance, which in the end amounted to approximately EUR 90 000.

Dimitar Hadzhiyski, Assistant to the National Member for Bulgaria at Eurojust, said: *'For the first time Eurojust facilitated the coordination between two separate JITs. Due to the active involvement of Eurojust, the links between all five national investigations carried out in Bulgaria, the Netherlands and Belgium were established, proper planning of the investigative activities was performed, which resulted in a very successful coordinated operation, dismantling the activities of the OCG.'*