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Britain Finds 3 Bulgarians Guilty of Spying for Russia

By Pippa Crawford

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Katrin Ivanova, Tihomir Ivanchev and Vanya Gaberova. **Metropolitan police**

Three Bulgarians were found guilty by a London court on Friday for their part in a sophisticated U.K.-based spy ring that targeted journalists and passed sensitive information to Russia over three years.

Katrin Ivanova, 33, Vanya Gaberova, 30, and Tihomir Ivanchev, 39, were convicted of conspiracy to spy at London's Old Bailey court at the end of a trial that lasted over three months.

Three other men pleaded guilty to offenses under the Official Secrets Act before the trial began.

During the trial, the court heard how the six U.K.-based Bulgarians carried out an elaborate series of operations across Europe — wearing disguises, using drones to survey a military

base, deploying "honey traps" against an investigative journalist, and discussing the kidnap and potential murder of a Russian dissident.

Ringleader Orlin Roussev, 47, ran the operation from his hotel in the British seaside town of Yarmouth. Police found rooms crammed with surveillance equipment worth 175,000 pounds ($226,000). Roussev coordinated the group's schemes while reporting upwards to Jan Marselek, the Austrian Wirecard fraudster linked to Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB).

"These convictions have been achieved as the result of an extremely complex investigation into a group that was carrying out sophisticated surveillance operations in the U.K., and in Europe, on behalf of the Russian state," said Commander Dominic Murphy, head of the Met's Counter Terrorism Command.

"This case is a clear example of the increasing amount of state threat casework we are dealing with in the U.K. — particularly linked to Russia," Murphy continued. "It also highlights a relatively new phenomenon whereby espionage is being 'outsourced' by certain states."

All three defendants convicted Friday were found guilty of being involved in conspiracy, contrary to section 1 of the Criminal Law Act 1977, to commit an offense under section 1 of the Official Secrets Act 1911 and could face up to 14 years in prison.

Before their arrests in February 2023, the trio led unassuming lives in London. Gaberova was a high-street beautician who won awards for her eyelash work. Ivanchev was a painter and decorator, and Ivanova was a laboratory assistant.

Ivanova and her partner ran a community organization for Bulgarians which included classes on the "culture and norms of British society," in the North London suburb of Harrow.

The complex romantic relationships between the spies were much discussed as the jury sought to unravel who was behind the schemes. Bizer Dzambazov, 43, who pleaded guilty before the trial began, was in a long-term relationship with Ivanova, but was arrested while in bed with Gaberova. Ivanchev, meanwhile, was Gaberova's ex-boyfriend.

Related article: Bulgarians Accused of Spying for Russia to Face Trial in London Court

Throughout the trial, Ivanova maintained she was misled by her unfaithful partner and had no knowledge of the wider conspiracy.

"I knew the information would be valuable to someone. But it didn't cross my mind that any government would be interested," she told the court in a tearful January appearance.

But her pleas were rejected as the Old Bailey jury reached a unanimous verdict.

Investigative journalists Christo Grosev and Roman Dobrokhotov were targeted by the spies as part of the six plots carried out on behalf of the Russian state. Grozev is best known for his work on the 2018 Skripal poisonings, a Russian-orchestrated attack on British soil.

In thousands of messages seen by the court, Roussev and his handler Marselek discussed reconnaissance of Grozev's home in Bulgaria, including drone surveillance and placing a

tracking device on his car. They toyed with the idea of drugging and kidnapping Grozev and delivering him to Moscow before concluding it "wasn't a good idea."

Multiple agents followed Grozev between different European cities and reported on his movements. Roussev and Marsalek were frustrated by a failed attempt to "honeytrap" the award-winning journalist, describing him as "a paranoid guy."

Dobrokhotov, the head of exiled Russian investigative outlet The Insider, was also a target. The court heard how one of the spies sat so close to him on a plane she recorded the PIN to open his phone, wearing Ray-Ban sunglasses with a hidden camera.

The spies also monitored Patch Barracks, a U.S. military base in Stuttgart. Whilst carrying out their surveillance in 2022 the group believed Ukrainian forces were being trained to use surface-to-air missile systems at the base.

Ivanova drove around the barracks taking pictures and videos, and using an "IMSI catcher" to intercept mobile signals inside the base. An IMSI is a sophisticated device rarely seen outside police or military hands; police seized similar equipment in the Yarmouth raid.

The remaining operations targeted Bergey Ryskaliyev, a former Kazakh politician granted asylum in the U.K., and Russian dissident Kirill Kachur.

Only Ivanchev was in court for Friday's verdict. The two women attended via video link from HMP Bronzefield, where they have spent the last two years.

Ivanova and Gaberova, both seated, remained subdued as the guilty verdicts were read. Ivanchev, standing in the dock, nodded briefly as he heard the jury's conclusion.

"While the outsourcing of espionage activity might suggest that recent efforts by the U.K. to thwart direct Russian activity have been effective, it means that we also have to guard against this new kind of emerging threat," Murphy said.

"Regardless of the form the threat takes, this investigation shows that we will take action to identify and disrupt any such activity that puts U.K. national security and the safety of the public at risk," he said.

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