# Six Bulgarians jailed for up to 11 years over Russian espionage targeting UK and Europe



Six Bulgarian nationals were sentenced in a London court for participating in a coordinated espionage operation for Russia, receiving prison terms of up to nearly 11 years. This case, which unfolded between 2020 and 2023, involved a series of plots targeting journalists, diplomats, and military personnel across the UK and Europe. Prosecutors noted that while there were no physical injuries, the group's activities posed a significant threat, endangering lives and national security.

Justice Nicholas Hilliard, presiding over the case, emphasized the grave risk these individuals presented by using the UK as a base for their covert operations. "It is self-evident that a high price attaches to the safety and interests of this nation," he stated, highlighting the seriousness of their crimes. Ringleader Orlin Roussev received the harshest sentence of 10 years and 8 months, closely followed by his lieutenant, Biser Dzhambazov, who was sentenced to 10 years and 2 months. The remaining members of the group received varying sentences, reflecting their degrees of involvement.

Interestingly, Roussev’s operations were linked to Jan Marsalek, a notorious figure associated with the collapse of German payment firm Wirecard. Prosecutors revealed that Marsalek, who remains at large and is believed to be in Russia, communicated extensively with Roussev regarding various espionage activities. Their discussions reportedly covered strategies not only involving traditional espionage but also arms trading and covert operations related to the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, showcasing the broader geopolitical implications at play.

The group employed whimsical Hollywood-inspired code names, with Roussev referring to himself as "Jackie Chan" and Dzhambazov as "Mad Max." Such pseudonyms belied the serious and often sinister nature of their actual activities. One operation involved attempting to lure investigative journalist Christo Grozev—who had previously revealed the Kremlin’s involvement in the high-profile Novichok poisoning case—into a ‘honeytrap’ scheme aimed at silencing dissent.

In court, Grozev described the profound impact of being targeted by foreign agents, revealing that the incessant surveillance had fundamentally altered his day-to-day life and sense of security. "Learning only in retrospect that foreign agents have been monitoring my movements... has been terrifying," he remarked, underscoring the psychological toll of their actions.

Complicating matters were romantic entanglements within the group, particularly involving Dzhambazov, who engaged with several of his collaborators. Defence lawyers painted a picture of manipulation and naiveté among the female operatives, yet the judge maintained that they were fully aware of their roles in supporting Russian interests.

Moreover, the nexus between Marsalek and the spy network demonstrates a broader trend of utilising foreign operatives for espionage, particularly in the wake of increased tensions following the Ukraine conflict. Reports indicate that Marsalek had ambitions beyond mere espionage, even discussing the procurement of drone technology and managing logistics for armed mercenaries.

This case serves as a stark reminder of the evolving landscape of espionage, where individuals are often lured into dangerous activities under the guise of romantic or personal relationships, all while operating within a larger geopolitical framework. It also sends a clear message from UK authorities about their commitment to thwarting hostile operations on British soil. Security Minister Dan Jarvis underscored this point, asserting that the severity of the sentences reflects the government’s resolve to safeguard national security.

As this saga continues to unfold, with implications extending far beyond the UK, it raises critical questions concerning the methods and motives of espionage in the modern era, particularly as nations navigate the complexities of international relations in a rapidly changing world.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/russia-london-montenegro-police-wirecard-b2749535.html> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://apnews.com/article/a54930d91023a9f29f793a9908c2b541> - Six Bulgarian nationals have been sentenced in the UK for conducting espionage operations for Russia, receiving prison terms of up to nearly 11 years. The group, using Hollywood-inspired code names, plotted operations across the UK and Europe from 2020 to 2023, targeting journalists, diplomats, and military personnel. Though no physical harm occurred, prosecutors emphasized the serious threat posed. Ringleader Orlin Roussev, sentenced to 10 years and 8 months, worked for fugitive Jan Marsalek, an alleged Russian agent linked to the Wirecard scandal. Co-defendant Biser Dzhambazov, Roussev’s lieutenant, received 10 years and 2 months. The group used covert spy equipment and plotted schemes including 'honeytraps' and even kidnapping. Christo Grozev, a targeted journalist, shared the destabilizing impact of being monitored. The court viewed their actions as grave threats to national security. Other group members received sentences between 5 and nearly 10 years. Romantic entanglements and manipulation within the group further complicated the case, though the judge maintained their culpability. All six face deportation after serving their sentences. UK officials underscored the ruling as a strong message against hostile espionage operations on British soil.
3. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/wirecard-fugitive-discussed-weapons-diamonds-with-russian-spy-ring-leader-2025-05-09/> - Jan Marsalek, the fugitive ex-COO of collapsed firm Wirecard, is implicated in an international espionage and arms dealing case involving a Russian spy ring based in the UK. London court proceedings revealed that Marsalek and Orlin Roussev, the ring's leader, discussed supplying drones for Russia's war in Ukraine, trading weapons and blood diamonds, and providing mercenaries in Africa. Six Bulgarians linked to the group are facing up to 14 years in prison for surveillance activities, including targeting journalists and Ukrainian soldiers in Germany. Prosecutors noted the group was motivated by financial gain rather than direct ties to Russian intelligence. Marsalek, believed to be in Russia, also discussed procuring drones from China and conducting weapons trades benefiting Cameroon. The court heard of their admiration for Elon Musk and potential exploitation of Starlink. Additionally, they coordinated a non-humanitarian evacuation from Kabul in 2021, linked to U.S. private firm Constellis. Legal proceedings continue at London’s Old Bailey, with several group members convicted or pleading guilty. The Kremlin has denied any involvement.
4. <https://www.ft.com/content/d91d6ffc-28ef-4abf-9d55-f48bce9d32f0> - In September 2021, Bulgarian IT expert Orlin Roussev and Wirecard's former COO Jan Marsalek discussed a plan on Telegram to abduct an investigator hiding in Montenegro. Marsalek, wanted for fraud in Europe, was working with Russian intelligence agencies, running a spy network in the UK. Their schemes, involving sabotage and espionage against opponents of Russia, were exposed during a UK trial. Three operatives under Roussev were convicted on espionage charges. Evidence showed Marsalek funding and directing these activities, often criticizing inefficient Russian spies. Despite some grandiose plans, their espionage yielded little useful intelligence. Marsalek, operating since 2014, leveraged Bulgarian nationals for these missions, reflecting Moscow's increased reliance on foreign agents post-Ukraine war. The trial revealed Marsalek's transformation into a key figure in Russian espionage, exploiting his skills and networks from his fugitive status.
5. <https://www.ft.com/content/cd157bc6-b42f-494d-a72a-130d6ccbcdc6> - Austria's intelligence agency is investigating a Bulgarian national linked to Wirecard fugitive Jan Marsalek for alleged espionage and abetting a Russian disinformation campaign against Ukraine. Austrian investigators discovered an 'extensive Russian disinformation campaign' after the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, which targeted German-speaking countries, focusing on Austria. The Bulgarian woman in question admitted to working for a cell posing as a pro-Ukrainian group, aiming to sway public opinion against Ukraine's President Zelenskyy. This cell used various tactics, including online content and physical graffiti, to spread false narratives. Evidence was found during a raid on her home, revealing connections to Marsalek, who fled to Russia after Wirecard's collapse. This discovery aligns with recent UK trial conclusions where Bulgarian nationals were convicted of spying for Russia under Marsalek's direction. Austria, a neutral EU member with numerous international organizations, has faced criticism for rising espionage activities on its soil, which has impacted its standing among European neighbors.
6. <https://apnews.com/article/25c58a164728020ea1742d3dce191f62> - The former CEO of Wirecard, Markus Braun, testified at his trial, denying knowledge of false accounting practices that led to the company's collapse in 2020. Wirecard, once a prominent fintech firm in Germany, filed for insolvency after revealing that 1.9 billion euros were unaccounted for, exposing flaws in the country's financial oversight. Braun, along with two other former managers, faces fraud charges, with allegations that much of Wirecard's revenue and assets were fabricated. Braun claimed ignorance of any falsification or misappropriation of funds, while prosecutors allege he knowingly signed off on false financial reports. The fraud reportedly resulted in banks losing 3.1 billion euros. Jan Marsalek, the former COO and a central figure in the case, remains a fugitive. Braun's defense argues that he was unaware of any wrongdoing by others.
7. <https://www.ft.com/content/6bb550d0-5345-4399-aecc-3e4965059da4> - James Henry O'Sullivan, a former business partner of Jan Marsalek, testified in a Singaporean court about his relationship with the fugitive ex-Wirecard executive as part of O'Sullivan’s trial for allegedly falsifying documents related to Wirecard's collapse. O'Sullivan described Marsalek as an intelligent but socially awkward individual who often mixed business with social activities. He revealed that Marsalek used highly secretive communication apps like Telegram and conducted investigations into perceived enemies of Wirecard. O'Sullivan denied charges of instructing co-defendant Shan Rajaratnam to fabricate documents, which falsely indicated that accounts held millions on Wirecard's behalf. The trial highlights Wirecard's substantial €1.9bn accounting scandal that led to its downfall in 2020. The prosecutorial evidence includes extensive communications and fabricated documents discovered on Rajaratnam's devices. The trial is ongoing.