# Six Bulgarians jailed for Russia-linked spy ring targeting UK and Europe



Six Bulgarian nationals have received prison sentences of up to nearly 11 years for orchestrating a sophisticated espionage operation that targeted journalists, diplomats, and military personnel connected to opposing nations, primarily for the benefit of Russia. This dramatic court ruling, delivered by Justice Nicholas Hilliard, underscores the ongoing threat posed by foreign espionage on British soil.

The group, operating under colourful Hollywood-inspired code names, executed plans between 2020 and 2023 to surveil and potentially harm those deemed adversaries of the Kremlin. Ringleader Orlin Roussev, who has ties to Jan Marsalek—a fugitive tied to the notorious collapse of the German payment processing firm Wirecard—was sentenced to 10 years and 8 months. Prosecutors revealed that the group had discussed ideas such as kidnapping or assassination, with operations spread across the UK, Germany, Austria, Spain, and Montenegro.

Although no physical harm was reported, the gravity of their activities was underscored by the potential danger they posed to the lives of their targets. “It is self-evident that a high price attaches to the safety and interests of this nation,” stated Justice Hilliard in the sentencing remarks. Security Minister Dan Jarvis also commented on the case, emphasising that it sends a strong warning to adversarial states about the UK’s commitment to countering espionage attempts and protecting public safety.

The investigation revealed that Roussev’s operation was not merely a ragtag group of spies but rather a serious undertaking with extensive resources. Roussev maintained a home outfitted with advanced surveillance technology, including devices capable of jamming Wi-Fi and GPS signals. Additionally, hidden cameras were found in everyday items like sunglasses and toys. Correspondence between Roussev and Marsalek indicated a deliberate intention to engage in espionage activities that included monitoring Ukrainian troops and plotting against perceived enemies, illustrating an alarming trend where non-state actors are increasingly being used as proxies in international espionage.

Three additional members of the group, identified as “minions” in their covert operations, received sentences varying from five to nearly ten years. Katrin Ivanova, Vanya Gaberova, and Tihomir Ivanov Ivanchev received significant terms for their roles, despite claims of misunderstanding their involvement due to manipulation by Dzhambazov, Roussev’s lieutenant. The intertwining of personal relationships within the group complicated the defence, yet Justice Hilliard pointed to their cognizance of the gravity of their actions, suggesting that they were attracted to the excitement of their espionage activities rather than being mere pawns.

The case drew attention not only for its revelations of espionage but also for how romantic entanglements played a crucial role. Dzhambazov’s relationships with both women in the group led to claims of deception, but these did not absolve them of responsibility. The court maintained that each member had willingly engaged in acts contributing to a broader and more dangerous agenda.

Each of the convicted individuals now faces deportation once they have served their sentences, adding a layer of diplomatic complexity as the UK navigates its relationships with Bulgaria and Russia in the wake of these revelations. The case is a stark reminder of the intricate web of international espionage that often cuts through everyday life, raising questions about national security and the ramifications of state-sponsored threats.

As the world becomes increasingly interlinked, the methods of espionage are evolving; the reliance on non-nationals for such operations reflects a concerning trend. This case epitomises the challenges faced by modern democracies in safeguarding their citizens from covert threats that, while perhaps invisible on the surface, can unravel the very fabric of societal security and trust.

### Reference Map

1. Paragraphs 1, 2, 3, 8
2. Paragraphs 1, 4, 5, 7
3. Paragraphs 2, 3, 4, 6
4. Paragraphs 3, 4, 5, 7
5. Paragraphs 1, 4, 6
6. Paragraphs 2, 4, 5

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 were sentenced in the UK for conducting espionage operations for Russia, receiving prison terms 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. Ringleader Orlin Roussev, sentenced to 10 years and 8 months, worked for alleged Russian agent Jan Marsalek, an Austrian national wanted by Interpol for fraud and embezzlement after the 2020 collapse of German payment processing firm Wirecard. 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.ft.com/content/65c17f2f-64ad-42f3-b035-fef3f22c6bda> - Orlin Roussev, a Bulgarian national and leader of a Russia-backed spy ring in the UK, has been sentenced to 10 years and eight months in prison for espionage. Operating under the direction of Wirecard fugitive Jan Marsalek, Roussev was found guilty of gathering intelligence for Russia, including tracking individuals deemed adversaries by Moscow, posing serious threats to their safety. The spy ring, active between 2020 and 2023 across multiple European countries, also surveilled journalists and Russian dissidents and planned to monitor Ukrainian soldiers. Roussev’s close associate Biser Dzhambazov received a 10-year sentence, and other members were jailed for five to nearly ten years. All were Bulgarian nationals residing in the UK and face deportation after serving time. Marsalek, believed to reside in Russia, orchestrated tasks for the group through encrypted messages, including espionage and weapons procurement for the Ukraine war. The court heard how Roussev equipped his home for spy activity, amassing a trove of surveillance gear. While some members claimed they were deceived about their activities, Roussev denied any ideological allegiance, asserting financial motivation. The case exemplifies the emerging trend of states outsourcing espionage to non-nationals, reflecting modern espionage’s evolving methods.
4. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russian-spy-ring-leader-jailed-uk-nearly-11-years-2025-05-12/> - Orlin Roussev, leader of a British-based Russian spy ring, was sentenced to 10 years and eight months in prison by a London court for conspiracy to spy for Russia. Roussev, connected to Wirecard fugitive Jan Marsalek, directed a group of six Bulgarian nationals engaged in espionage for the Kremlin. The group collected surveillance on journalists, dissidents, and Ukrainian soldiers being trained at a U.S. base in Germany. Roussev and two others pleaded guilty, while three others were convicted in March. Roussev’s deputy, Bizer Dzhambazov, received 10 years and two months; Katrin Ivanova was sentenced to nine years and eight months; Vanya Gaberova to eight years minus time served; Tihomir Ivanchev to eight years; and Ivan Stoyanov to six years and four months. Authorities stated the group was not directly employed by Russian intelligence and operated largely for financial gain. Prosecutors described their actions as an industrial-scale threat to British national security. Communications between Roussev and Marsalek revealed extensive plans, including intercepting signals at a U.S. military base and humorous references to prior Russian operations in the UK. Marsalek, believed to be in Russia, remains at large. The Kremlin has denied all spy allegations.
5. <https://www.wsls.com/news/world/2025/03/07/3-bulgarians-convicted-of-spying-for-russia-across-europe-from-base-in-uk/> - Katrin Ivanova, 33, Vanya Gaberova, 30, and Tihomir Ivanov Ivanchev, 39, were convicted at London’s Central Criminal Court after a trial that began in November. Jurors deliberated for more than 32 hours before finding the Bulgarians guilty of plotting to spy for an enemy state. They face up to 14 years in prison when they are sentenced in May along with three other Bulgarian members of the same spy cell. The three, who were tangled in sexual relationships with one of their handlers or each other, denied being in on the plot and claimed they didn’t know who they were working for or were lied to by their superiors. Prosecutors said that the suspects carried out operations in the U.K., Austria, Spain, Germany and Montenegro between 2020 and 2023. It was alleged that they spied on a U.S. air base in Germany where they believed Ukrainian troops were training, and had discussed kidnapping or killing opponents of the Russian state. They also allegedly tried to lure a Bulgarian journalist who uncovered Moscow’s involvement in the 2018 Novichok poisoning of a former Russian spy in Salisbury, England, into a “honeytrap” romance with Gaberova.
6. <https://www.counterterrorism.police.uk/group-convicted-of-being-part-of-russian-spying-operation/> - A group of six Bulgarians living in the UK have been convicted of being part of a spying operation across Europe on behalf of Russia. Following a three-month trial at the Old Bailey, two women and a man were found guilty of conspiring to obtain information intended to be directly or indirectly useful to Russia. Three other men pleaded guilty to Official Secrets Act charges before the trial started. Head of the Met’s Counter Terrorism Command, Commander Dominic Murphy said: “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 UK, and in Europe, on behalf of the Russian state. This case is a clear example of the increasing amount of state threat casework we are dealing with in the UK – particularly linked to Russia.