

HUMAN TRAFFICKING NETWORK ENGAGED IN SEXUAL EXPLOITATION TARGETED IN AUSTRIA

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Press Release

Austrian law enforcement authorities, with the support of Europol and Romanian authorities, ran an operation on 11 December to identify victims of trafficking in human beings (THB) for sexual exploitation, and to arrest members of the criminal networks involved.

Several different locations in the Austrian state of Carinthia, including 41 brothels and 30 apartments and 20 gambling houses were checked, which resulted in the identification of 350 women, mainly Romanian, exercising prostitution. Of those, 15 were identified as potential victims of trafficking. Another 41 associated individuals were checked and 63 males were identified as suspects involved in THB. Romanian authorities took part in this field operation, directly supporting Austrian authorities on the spot, together with a Europol expert.

These actions took place in the framework of a long-running investigation into an organised crime group involved in trafficking young women from Eastern Europe into Western Europe for the purpose of sexual exploitation. The investigation was launched in 2013 when the activities of the criminal group were detected across different European countries. Cooperation between Austrian authorities and other countries involved (Austria, Germany, Romania and Switzerland) ensured good progress in the investigation, including the identification of suspects and a number of victims.

Yesterday's operation was the third in a series of targeted operational activities conducted within the same investigation. Two earlier action days previously carried out by Austrian authorities on 20 May and 4 September 2014 resulted in the positive identification of a number of suspects, as well as human trafficking victims, including minors that were being sexually exploited in brothels. Following these operational activities, Austrian authorities established that the members of the criminal group were also involved in organising false ID cards for the underage victims. The underage girls were forced to hand over all their income to their traffickers. If they did not meet the criminals' expected levels of daily income from prostitution, or if they wanted to stop prostitution, they were subjected to threats and violence.

Europol has actively supported this operation by facilitating information exchange throughout the investigation and providing operational analytical support during the action day, by real time cross-checking all data gathered through the deployment of Europol's mobile office in Austria. Europol also contributed to the investigation earlier this year by facilitating an operational meeting in Austria to better promote coordination between the countries involved and by providing on-the-spot support

during the previous two action days.

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