Bulgarian and Spanish judicial and law enforcement authorities,* working in close cooperation with Europol's European Cybercrime Centre (EC3), have taken down a Bulgarian organised crime group suspected of a variety of crimes including payment card fraud, burglary, drug trafficking and illicit vehicle trafficking. Three action days have resulted in 25 arrests and 21 house searches in Spain and Bulgaria.

The modus operandi of the criminal group and their affiliates was to harvest financial data from ATMs in Spain and other EU countries to create fake credit or debit cards. These cards were then used to withdraw large amounts of cash from ATMs both within and outside the European Union.

The first action day in October 2013 in eastern Spain led to the arrest of six individuals, all of whom are still in custody, and three house searches. Law enforcement authorities seized 15 devices used to copy PINs, more than 10 devices to record the information onto credit/debit card magnetic strips, several laptops, and documents plotting ATM locations.

Another branch of the criminal group was dismantled during the second action day on 16 January 2014, resulting in 16 arrests plus the searching of 14 houses and two companies. Items seized included 19 mobile telephones, 21 debit cards, several laptops and other electronic devices including those designed to commit skimming offences. The operation was carried out via an operational coordination centre at Europol, led by Europol's Spanish and Bulgarian Desks. Europol EC3 experts and liaison officers were at the operational centre with a mobile office, which allowed the cross-checking, analysis and exchange of intelligence in real time. Simultaneously, Europol representatives were deployed to Bulgaria and Spain to support the operation on the ground.

The third action day took place on 6 February 2014, which saw three arrests and four house searches. Two factories were raided and equipment used for skimming was seized, including blank cards, micro-camera bars and card readers.

The first coordination meeting in April 2013 established a joint investigation team (JIT) between Bulgarian and Spanish authorities, working with Europol and Europol. Europol provided legal advice
as well as funding and essential logistical equipment through its JIT Funding Project. Europol supported the investigation with operational analysis from the early stages, and funding for further operational meetings in The Hague, Bulgaria and Spain.

* Bulgarian Specialized Prosecution Office in Sofia and the State Agency for National Security (SANS); and Juzgado Central de Instrucción nº 3 and the Prosecution Office of the Audiencia Nacional in Madrid with the National Police of Spain.

Watch the video (in Spanish)

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