



PANKAJ SHARMA

A BBC investigation has recently named two women who were part of a Russian spy network run from the UK. It is for the first time in recent past that a TV channel with strong global presence has formally revealed the identity of Vladimir Putin’s undercover agents.

Bulgarian nationals Cvetelina Gencheva and Tsvetanka Doncheva took part in elaborate surveillance operations against people spied on by the cell. BBC made efforts to take the versions of Gencheva and Doncheva but neither of them answered questions when contacted. Ms Gencheva, an airport worker, hung up when contacted by phone, and said she did not want to comment on the case in response to a subsequent letter. Ms Doncheva denied being herself and walked away when approached near her home in Vienna, Austria.

Six other Bulgarians are awaiting sentencing in London for their roles in spying for Russia as part of the cell. Police described the network as a “highly sophisticated” operation that threatened lives. Three pleaded guilty, admitting knowing they were working for Russia, while three more were convicted in the month of March after a trial at the Old Bailey having failed to persuade the jury that they didn’t.

Jan Marsalek is the person responsible behind the cell of Russian undercover agents. Marsalek is originally from Austria, who was a business executive in Germany before becoming a Russian intelligence asset. The cell’s targets included journalists who have investigated Russian espionage. The court heard about two mystery women who took part

in surveillance operations in Europe. The BBC tracked down and confirmed the identities of both women through open-source digital research and speaking to sources.

Ms Gencheva, who lives in the Bulgarian capital Sofia, exploited her work in the airline industry to obtain private flight details of people targeted by the cell. Spies followed the people onto planes and were booked in nearby seats, getting so close as to see

those convicted of spying in the UK case - cell leader Orlin Roussev, Biser Dzhambazov and Katrin Ivanova - which were used to co-ordinate the spying.

She provided flight details for journalist Christo Grozev, and was tasked with gathering as much travel information as possible on another target of the cell, Russian dissident Kirill Kachur. During the Old Bailey trial, the mystery airline worker was known as “Cvetka” or

is the sole owner of International Aviation Consult. Travel data found on a hard drive belonging to cell leader Roussev were from airline industry software known as “Amadeus”. On her LinkedIn profile, Ms Gencheva noted her proficiency with the software.

BBC contacted Ms Gencheva on a Bulgarian phone number she uses for real estate work. She hung up when informed the call was from BBC News and was being recorded, not even waiting

her public LinkedIn profile lists her English ability as “full professional proficiency” and says she has studied in English to degree level.

Ms Doncheva helped spy on the investigative journalist Christo Grozev in Vienna, occupying a flat opposite where he lived and operating a camera that took images of his home. She was paid to conduct an anti-Ukraine propaganda campaign, which included putting stickers on locations including Vienna’s Soviet war memorial and was intended to make supporters of Ukraine appear like neo-Nazis. The BBC identified Ms Doncheva through her social media profiles after the Old Bailey trial heard about a “Tsveti” who had worked with the cell. Sources in Austria then confirmed her identity. In Vienna, she met at least three of those convicted of spying in the UK case - Vanya Gaberova, Biser Dzhambazov and Katrin Ivanova.

Senior Austrian officials, including the head of the Secret Service Omar Hajjawi-Pirchner, were among those selected for surveillance by Ms Doncheva, alongside the Austrian investigative journalist Anna Thalhammer, who has written about Russian espionage. Ms Doncheva was arrested by Austrian police in December. Court documents first reported by the Austrian magazines Profil and Falter, and later seen by the BBC, reveal she is “strongly suspected of having committed the crime of secret intelligence to the detriment of Austria”.

She told investigators she conducted surveillance after being asked by long-time friend Vanya Gaberova - one of the six Bulgarians awaiting sentencing. She said Gaberova provided her with a list of names, addresses and photographs. She initially told police she had been misled by the others, who first told her they were conducting a “student project” and later that they were working for Interpol. But Austrian investigators are recorded as saying it is “incomprehensible” that Ms Doncheva believed such “dubious stories”.

The documents say the intelligence cell in which Ms Donche-

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Six Bulgarians who were convicted of conspiring to spy for Russia. Orlin Roussev, Katrin Ivanova, Ivan Stoyanov, Tsvetelina Gencheva, Vanya Gaberova and Biser Dzhambazov.



Cvetelina Gencheva

Tsvetanka Doncheva

RUSSIAN SPIES TARGETING JOURNALISTS

what was being typed into their targets’ mobiles phones, even at one stage identifying a Pin number for a phone belonging to journalist Roman Dobrokhoto. Ms Gencheva was part of a team sent to Berlin to spy on Mr Dobrokhoto, and she was a member of chat groups with three of

“Sveti”. The BBC first identified Ms Gencheva through her social media profiles. On Facebook, she had interacted with Katrin Ivanova and Biser Dzhambazov. According to her LinkedIn profile, she has held positions in ticket sales for travel companies. Bulgarian company filings say she

for an explanation of what BBC wanted to know from her. In response to a letter setting out the evidence relating to her, she said she did “not wish to comment on the case” and did not consent for her name to be used. Writing in Bulgarian, she claimed not to speak English well. However,

USA.....US\$ 5	China.....CNY 30	Fiji.....FJ\$ 10	Japan.....JPY 575	Nepal.....NPR 500
Canada.....CA\$ 6	Hong Kong.....HK\$ 35	Suriname.....SR\$ 15	Malaysia.....MYR 18	Maldives.....MVR 75
European Countries.....Euro 5	South Africa.....ZAR 60	Trinidad & Tobago.....TT\$ 30	Singapore.....SG\$ 7	Bangladesh.....TK 375
Australia.....AU\$ 6	West Africa.....CAF 3000	UAE and Gulf.....AED 20	Thailand.....THB 60	India.....INR 300
Russian Federation.....RUB 250	Mauritius.....MUR 150	Saudi Arab.....SAR 20	Sri Lanka.....LKR 625	

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WILL INDIA BENEFIT FROM MONARCHY IN NEPAL

by GII Bureau

Nepal has witnessed large-scale clashes between pro-monarchy supporters and security forces in recent weeks. The centuries-old monarchy, which was abolished in Nepal in 2008, has regained popularity among right-wing Hindu groups and other advocates. Will the return of monarchy in Nepal in India’s interest?

India might assume that dealing with a monarchy in Nepal would be easier than dealing with an ever-changing government that leans towards Beijing and its policies. This rests on an assumption that a reinstated monarch would renew old diplomatic relations and ties with India. But this is not easy considering China’s now well-established position in Nepal.

The Shah dynasty had ruled Nepal for centuries, but the desire for a democratic government gained momentum in the latter half of the 20th century. The popular People’s Movement of 2006 played a crucial role in Nepal’s political transition. Mass protests against the monarchy led to a series of changes which ultimately resulted in the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Accords on 21 November 2006 be-

tween the government and the Maoist rebels It paved the way for a political reshuffle.

The newly elected constituent assembly took a historic step in May 2008 by voting to abolish the monarchy. It formally ended the Shah dynasty’s century-old rule. This decision marked the official declaration of Nepal as a republic.

Now the protesters calling for the return of Gyanendra Shah who was the last royal ruler of Nepal before the monarchy was dissolved. They are demanding a constitutional monarchy that declares Nepal a parliamentary democracy with a Hindu identity.

If the crown returns in Nepal, the first and biggest effect will be felt by India. The Hindu population in Nepal fears the growth of other religions in the country and has been pushed into an existential crisis with the idea of the Hindu majority being at risk. Even after the republic was established, right-wing Hindu groups have sought to restore monarchy in Nepal. They want that that if full monarchy cannot return, at the very least ceremonial monarchy should be restored.

The current movement for the restoration of monarchy in Nepal aims to undo the achievements of the people’s movement

of 1990, which replaced absolute monarchy with constitutional monarchy, and the 2006 movement, which replaced constitutional monarchy with a republic.

In Nepal, the delivery of public services has not met the expectations of the people. Cases of corruption had been increasing over the years. These factors created the conditions for the re-emergence of the hitherto dormant royalists who demanded the restoration of monarchy in Nepal with the return of former king Gyanendra Shah. The pro-monarchists accused several political parties, including that of Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli, of being corrupt and incompetent in leading the country.

The protesters had given the government the ultimatum: restore monarchy in Nepal or face intensifying demonstrations. They then called for a large-scale protest in Kathmandu. The protest was accompanied by widespread vandalism, destruction of government offices, shopping malls, and private houses. As the clashing protesters and police moved towards the international airport, the authorities halted flights and the army had to be deployed.

The Nepali Congress, the Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxist Leninist), the Maoist

Centre, and the Communist Party of Nepal (Socialist) have all strongly condemned the monarchist violence. They want to hold the former king responsible for the protests, the destruction of public property, and the lives lost during the confrontation.

Although the support for monarchy in Nepal has grown exponentially in recent years, the chances of the former king gaining back control remain slim. The Republic has been constitutionally enshrined and the mainstream political parties of the country remain opposed to the idea of reinstating the monarchy.

The large Hindu population along with the pro-monarchy groups in Nepal eagerly wait for the return of monarchy. If the crown returns in Nepal, the first and biggest effect will be felt by India. India maintained its silence over the protests in Nepal. When India’s Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar was questioned by Nepal’s Foreign Minister Arzu Rana Deuba whether India supported the return of monarchy in Nepal, Jaishankar categorically denied it. But there are many individual groups in India who support the idea of Nepal becoming a Hindu Rashtra and even the restoration of monarchy.

Russian Spies Targeting Journalists

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va operated was ultimately controlled by Jan Marsalek from Moscow on behalf of the Russian intelligence services and that evidence seized by investigators shows she was contracted by Marsalek and the UK cell leader Orlin Roussev.

Profil editor Anna Thalhammer was also targeted for surveillance. The documents say Marsalek directed that Anna Thalhammer be targeted. Ms Doncheva admitted to police she had photographed the journalist’s then workplace and sought to watch her from a nearby restaurant. Ms Thalhammer, now editor of Austrian news magazine Profil, told the BBC she was first told about being spied on last year by police, and she is now aware of being watched for some time. “She obviously sat in front of the office in a very nice fish restaurant. I really can recommend it. She complained that it’s too expensive, that she needs more money. She got that money.” She says “that woman” also spied on a number

of “high-ranked people”.

Ms Thalhammer does not know where else she was followed, but that some of her sources were identified and attempts were made to break into their homes. She says “Vienna is the capital of spies” but no one has been sentenced in the city for espionage and the “law here is great for spies”. “I’m frustrated and I’m also honestly a little bit scared,” she added. “I live alone with my daughter. It’s not so nice to know that the state doesn’t take care if somebody is threatening journalists, politicians or anybody else.”

Ms Doncheva is a prolific social media user and even her cat has a TikTok account. Ms Doncheva posted a photo of herself on Facebook in a Vladimir Putin T-shirt in 2022 and 2023. When someone commented that in Russia a large percentage of women want to have Putin’s baby, Ms Doncheva replied saying not only in Russia, followed by a lip-licking emoji. Ms Doncheva denied being herself when approached by the BBC in a Vienna street and refused to an-

swer questions, but the woman was indeed Ms Doncheva. When approached, she was wearing clothes and carrying items seen in Ms Doncheva’s social media posts: a distinctive blue tracksuit, a pair of glasses, and a patterned mobile phone case. We also observed her entering Ms Doncheva’s registered home address less than 20 minutes after she denied being Ms Doncheva.

The two women worked alongside the six Bulgarians who were convicted of conspiring to spy for Russia. A cache of almost 80,000 Telegram messages between Roussev and his controller Marsalek was recovered by UK police. The messages revealed multiple operations carried out by the cell in the years before February 2023, when their activities were disrupted by police.

The UK-based spies even targeted Ukrainian soldiers thought to be training at a US military base in Germany. Roussev and Marsalek discussed kidnapping and killing journalists Christo Grozev and Roman Dobrokhoto. Unlike the six spies convicted in the UK, Ms Doncheva and

Ms Gencheva are not in custody and have not been convicted of any offence. The Austrian public prosecutor’s request for pre-trial detention of Ms Doncheva was rejected and she was released. Austrian court documents state there is “no risk” of Ms Doncheva absconding because she is “socially integrated” in the country and cares for her mother, and that a risk of further crime is not particularly high given the imprisonment in the UK of others involved.

Ms Thalhammer told the BBC she “can’t understand” why the person who spied on her was released. She said the Austrian secret service thinks there are other spy cells and that their activity has continued after the arrest of the six Bulgarians in the UK. Ms Gencheva has remained free in Bulgaria, publicly presenting herself as an experienced airline and travel industry professional. After being contacted by the BBC, Ms Gencheva changed her profile name on Facebook and LinkedIn. She continues to list her proficiency with the Amadeus airline software.