I'm human

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A 55-year-old man from Mossyrock has been charged with money laundering and conspiracy in connection with several websites that exploit children for sexual purposes. Anthony Lee Kendall is accused of laundering around $1 million for these sites. Meanwhile, Plamen Georgiev Velinob, a Bulgarian national, faces up to 50 years in prison if convicted on charges related to advertising and distributing child pornography. The US Department of Justice has labeled the websites "sexually exploitive child modeling" and alleges that Kendall and others involved laundered millions of dollars from these sites. Velinob was arrested in Sofia, Bulgaria, while Kendall was arrested in Washington. If convicted, Velinov faces a minimum of 15 years in prison for conspiring to advertise child pornography, while Kendall could face up to 20 years in federal prison. The indictment also seeks the forfeiture of over $434,000 in assets allegedly linked to the offenses. The investigation revealed that Velinob directed and controlled foreign operations of the Newstar Enterprise, an internet-based business that exploited vulnerable children under the guise of "child modeling". Kendall allegedly performed financial functions for the company, including opening payment processing accounts and facilitating transactions worth around $1 million. Other members of the Newstar Enterprise, including Kenneth Power's wife Tatiana, are currently facing trial on money laundering charges. The Newstar Enterprise produced over 4.6 million sexualized images and videos featuring minors, some as young as six years old, which were distributed and sold on its websites. The company targeted vulnerable children from Ukraine and other Eastern European nations, exploiting their age, family situations, and poverty. Law enforcement officers have shut down the servers hosting the Newstar Websites. Bellingcat published details from an investigation that led to the geolocation of an image listed by Europol as part of their #StopChildAbuse campaign. The image was part of a crowdsourcing effort called Trace an Object, where censored extracts are shared online and the public helps identify the location or country of origin. By contributing to this initiative, Bellingcat previously helped geolocate images in China and Russia. The specific image, referred to as ImageC5, had no distinctive features, only a desolate landscape with weeds and rural buildings. Through their research, they discovered that ImageC5 actually hid a dark story about the victims affected by it and ultimately led them to geolocate it to Kalahliya, a Ukrainian village near Odessa. The initial observations about the image revealed a small terrain gradient, rural houses, dried weeds, and an orange/brick construction on the right side. Europol edited the image to protect the victim, which resulted in almost 10% of the landscape being reconstructed. This caused repetition of items throughout the image. Important definitions include Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM), also known as child pornography, which refers to any representation of a child engaged in explicit sexual activities or the display of their sexual parts for primarily sexual purposes. As of March 2019, Europol received over 23,000 tips from the crowdsourcing campaign, leading to the identification of eight victims and the prosecution of one offender. 24% - Ukraine was first in Eastern Europe in 2016, with documented child trafficking for sexual exploitation from Moldova to Moscow and St. Petersburg. A small rural Soviet-style village style was observed on ImageC5, unlike Western European architecture. The lack of tropical, coniferous, or desert vegetation suggests Asia, Middle East, dense forested areas in Europe/North America were not considered. Grasslands are found across Ukraine, Moldova, and a thin belt along the Russia-Kazakhstan border (See Figure 2). Initial searches focused on villages linked to major cities like Moscow and Kyiv within the marked area (Figure 3). A breakthrough came from a regional children exploitation report in early June, leading to a comprehensive investigative file detailing child modelling studio trafficking children from Moldova to Ukraine for CSAM production. The original source was shared with Europol before publication. All accessed images were heavily censored by the original source; researchers did not obtain, view or download explicit content. Fictitious names were used in this report. The investigative file described the operation of a child modelling studio, leading to information that helped geolocate ImageC5. An investigation into child sexual abuse material (CSAM) linked a studio and their associated websites to the Odessa region in Ukraine. Files revealed a list of unknown locations where models were photographed for Website2 in 2001, but no specific geolocation was provided. However, a thumbnail containing an image published by Europol was found, establishing a direct link between ImageC5 and an official Child Sexual Abuse case. The search evolved into finding more identifiable landmarks, such as building ruins and a red church, which could be used to locate ImageC5's location. A diagram presented in Figure 4 shows the selection of unknown locations related to ImageC5. Initial efforts to find the red church were made using Google Earth and Yandex, but the large number of churches in Odessa oblast made it difficult to scrutinize them one by one. Valuable landscape and architecture information was gathered, with similarities found in areas such as Anan’iv Pershyi and Vyzyrka. A dimensional analysis on several churches established a reference geometric pattern (Figure 5), which included the height of the bell tower being the same as the altar tower, excluding the domes, and the width of the altar tower being approximately double the bell tower. Exterior made of red bricks was noted, but it could have been repainted. Both towers could feature round, semi-round, pitched or onion type domes, and in church architecture, altar towers are normally oriented to the East. All cases in Odessa lacked exception, making Ruins (1&8) likely located southeast of the church. When finding geolocations, this is a crucial check to perform. Figure 5 displays the dimensional characteristics of a similar church in Odessa oblast. The Ruins Group Ruins (1&8) featured what appeared to be the remnants of a small industrial facility. Scattered precast pillars were seen on the ground, along with walls showcasing faded pink tones, large holes, and bullet marks. These features seemed similar to those left by projectile impacts, likely resulting from previous conflicts in the area. However, finding this type of ruin within an area of 40,000 km2, including Odessa oblast and west Moldova, proved challenging. The ruins' existence or clearance for new developments also needed investigation. Furthermore, determining which conflict could have inflicted such damage on a rural structure before 2001 required exploration. Using Google imagery, examples of ruins were gathered to establish a visual reference, as shown in Figure 6. Two main events were considered: WWII and the Transnistria conflict in 1992. WWII's front lines were studied according to literature and maps in Figure 7. In 1941, a system of three defence rings was established by the Soviets to protect Odessa; the outermost ring was located at a 50km mark from the city. From March to April 1944, the Red Army launched offensives to liberate Odessa. In August 1944, as part of the Jassy–Kishinev operation to reclaim the Moldavian SSR, the Red Army engaged a large German-Romanian contingent with heavy battles starting with the Akkerman landing. Geolocating ImageC5 By Finding Other Locations Related To The Case 1. Location Ruins (2,3&7) – The Greenhouse Ruins (2,3&7) appeared to be part of a period property or castle featuring a glass roof structure typical of those found in old greenhouses. The location served its purpose until the 1990s but eventually became abandoned due to various events. The site was used by a studio to produce CSAM between July and August 2001, as reported by the source. No signs of the ruins or red church were found in the surrounding areas. A figure showcasing the approximate location of apartments owned by the studio in Odessa city highlighted the area where our investigation got closer to identifying a child abuse site: the greenhouse. A photo of an 1889 greenhouse in Odessa City, dated 2016, was gathered and analyzed. Many features within its interior matched those found in censored thumbnails of ruins (2, 3 & 7), indicating a possible connection. The source reported that this location was used by the studio to produce several CSAM between July and August 2001. The investigation then moved on to another area - Oleksandrivske Reservoir - which seemed to match characteristics in thumbnail images for locations (3, 6 & 7). The source also stated that this location was used by the studio to produce CSAM. A transmission tower and cables crossing above water were noticed across the reservoir. By setting the time bar to a specific date, the grass on the peninsula showed up as dried and small trees could be seen clearer now on the east side of the peninsula, just behind the transmission tower. A match was found (see Figure 10). The source reported that this location was used by the studio to produce CSAM in October 2001. The investigation then checked the rest of the reservoir for more clues and noticed a white building with a slim tree in the front, east of the previous location. These elements matched those displayed on location Inland (7), indicating another possible connection. After analyzing the image, it was determined that the shot was taken from the south shore of the Oleksandrivske Reservoir (see Figure 10). The source reported that this location was used by the studio to produce CSAM in October 2001. No signs of Ruins (1 & 8) or the red church were identified in the surrounding areas. Around Odessa, we'd noticed Kuyalnik Reservoir with its distinctive pink sands. Re-examining the images for a closer look revealed a Google Maps shot of the same cliff on the reservoir's west shore. This spot featured angular lines converging downwards and touching the horizon, along with dark pink sand and curved water marks. Another location verified, but no signs of Ruins (1 & 8) or the red church were spotted nearby. Figure 11: Kuyalnik Estuary. Notably, the source linked this site to CSAM production in September 2001. Many images from group Coast (1 & 6), featuring a peninsula with a slim tree on it, seemed to be taken at Mykolaivka Village near the Dniester Estuary. The censored shots often showed a shore close to a grassy cliff, with rocks bigger than 1.5 meters in diameter appearing in almost every frame from different angles. All main elements were numbered and organised by scene. Having checked other bodies of water on the northeast side of Odessa's coastal region, the southwest area around the Dniester Estuary was explored using Google Earth. On the east coast at Mykolaivka Village level, a small peninsula with several trees was found. One tree produced a long shadow relative to its size and position, matching the censored thumbnails' alignment. Large rocks could be seen along the shore from the 2014 satellite image. After careful analysis, all rocks and trees were identified in Figure 12: Location Coast (1& 6). The source linked this site to CSAM production between July and August 2001. After geolocating four sites related to the case, a 50 km radial perimeter was established around Odessa, coinciding with one of the WWII battle fronts on the Dniester Estuary's east shore. It was believed that some type of ruins, if linked to the war at all, would be found within this area. Figure 13: Geolocation of the selected group of images marked in red. A visual inspection around Kalahliya Village revealed a church at coordinates 46.281507, 30.358500 on June 2, named Церква Миколая (Mikolay Church). Given text here: We confirmed the Church of St Nicholas matched our references, as did Twitter user Lorenzo Romani. The church's features aligned with ImageC5. A search around the church found no recognizable ruin structure. However, historical Google Earth images revealed a compound in ruins since 2007. Without street views, we scrutinized Images and YouTube videos to identify all buildings visible on ImageC5. A drone video provided the best view of the site, helping us identify each element and estimate camera position (Figure 15 and Figure 16). We checked two buildings: single pitch roof and brick construction. Videos recorded from Road T1625 matched satellite views and ImageC5 features (Figure 17). All elements confirmed those on ImageC5. By analyzing satellite images and thumbnails, we extracted information about trees, shadows, sunlight direction, vegetation, exterior paint colors, and debris position. A solar calculation was done for September 2001. Combining all puzzle pieces, a basic sketch of the ruins was created (Figure 18). The reconstruction suggests an old industrial/army facility. With elements identified, the site was verified, and ImageC5 geolocated. The investigation uncovered a network of images and image thumbnails linked to a criminal organization, commonly referred to as "Studio A." The source revealed that this studio was involved in producing Child Abuse Sexual Material (CSAM) between August and September 2001. Figure 19 illustrates the process used to geolocate ImageC5, which ultimately led to the convergence of findings. To provide context on Studio A's operation, we will briefly discuss their associated websites as reported by the source. Although this information is over two decades old, it highlights the impact of criminal organizations like Studio A on the production and distribution of CSAM. Their business model involved paying off victims' families, developing educational programs to gain public trust, and exploiting loopholes in laws governing CSAM. Studio A was founded by Denis M. and Sergey P. in the early 2000s with financial backing from European investors. The company's operations included a subscription-based website, transportation, administration, and security services provided by former law enforcement officers. The studio scouted underage models around schools in eastern Europe, primarily Moldova, often targeting children from impoverished backgrounds who were promised modeling work to support their families. These young victims lived in apartments owned by the studio, receiving computer, arts, and English lessons when not engaged in "modelling." To legitimize their criminal enterprise, Studio A organized outings with the parents of these underage models. This information is presented as a summary, extracted from investigative files, and does not reflect the views of the authors. Denis had lied repeatedly about his business being "socially responsible" and part of a charity with a big human rights group. Papers showed Sergey, who ran the business on his own, was super addicted to heavy drugs. People he'd taken pictures of naked said Sergey would then physically hurt them and get them hooked on stuff. It's unclear what happened with Denis and Sergey's partnership, but they split up in 2001 because they couldn't agree. After that, things got weird. Sergey kept the old company, while Denis changed its name to Studio A*. Sergey convinced some parents and kids to go work for him, and another guy started a new website called Studio A* too. They both used pictures of young girls who'd been taken advantage of in Russia. Later, Denis made new stuff with kids from Moldova. Sergey sold the old material to other people online and kept working for other studios. He even started a new one called Studio C. Both their websites got shut down around 2002. Denis said someone else hijacked his second website and put up more nasty pictures, but he blamed it on Russian groups. After 9/11, police in the US and Ukraine started investigating weird stuff online. In 2002, two women with four young girls were stopped at a train station near the Ukraine-Moldova border. They had fake papers to take the kids out of the country. The kids said they got $50 each time for taking pictures with Denis and Sergey. Police raided all their studios, found drugs and nasty pics, but Denis and Sergey had already left. Denis went to Switzerland and Moldova, while Sergey lived in Moldova, Germany, and the US. The Ukrainian government charged them with making and selling bad stuff in 2002, but dropped the charges against Denis because it wasn't a crime at that time. He even relaunched his website without naughty pictures and started a new studio called Studio B. Both their websites were gone by 2004. Information regarding Studio A remains unclear, including the age of individuals involved and the timing of recruitment into the studio's activities in Moldova. A documentary was created to showcase Denis and girls working for the studio more recently, but it never went commercial. Most data from Sergey's CSAM production is missing due to lack of records. Due to abuse allegations and CSAM dissemination, Sergey faced a wanted list by German police; however, information on his prosecution status is unavailable. Some key findings after analyzing investigative files include: ImageC5 was produced for Website2, with at least 60 victims aged 8-17 working there, producing over 7300 images in under a year, and publishing around 270 image sets. Approximately 40% of CSAM content was created on-site while the rest was from outdoor locations, including Ukraine (with an average of 3%, maxing out at 8% in Russia). Seven photographers worked for the site, including Denis and others linked to the studio. The source reported employing various staff, including those with law enforcement backgrounds. $250,000 were received by Denis and Sergey's personal accounts from their Ukrainian operation. The conclusion emphasizes that without context, ImageC5 contained no relevant information, highlighting the importance of literature reviews in child abuse cases for accurate geolocation and data collection. Some details remain unshared to protect victims. We're not just dealing with your average crowdsourcing campaign here. The potential of analyzing vast amounts of data might allow us to compare landscapes and information between old and new images, narrowing down a geographical area or even sparking leads for new cases. A notorious case in point is Studio A, which was all about exploiting kids for financial gain through child sexual abuse and human trafficking. The perpetrators cleverly disguised their operation as socially responsible, playing on the stakeholders' desire to be seen as virtuous. But behind this façade lay a complex web of corruption and exploitation that allowed them to thrive. Fast forward to Ukraine, where things have taken a turn for the worse. What started as a problem has now become an epidemic, exacerbated by the rapid advancement of technology and communication channels. New forms of crime have emerged, and the production and dissemination of child abuse material are on the rise in the Ukraine-Moldova-Belarus-Russia region. By sharing our investigative findings and search methods with authorities, we believe we can make a tangible difference in bringing perpetrators to justice and strengthening the #StopChildAbuse network. Our goal is to empower both the public and OSINT professionals to be vigilant and report any suspicious information to the relevant authorities. Even seemingly old images shared by Europol might hold the key to new cases – every lead or input into their database could mean the difference between continued abuse and rescue for victims. At Bellingcat, we're fully committed to this fight against child exploitation and abuse.