

Report

(Introduction + summary anonymised)
dated 5 July 2023

research commissioned by

KRO-NCRV

in Hilversum



1. Introduction

Commissioned by KRO-NCRV, located at 's Gravelandseweg 80 in Hilversum, an investigation was conducted into allegations of possible misconduct approximately 20 years ago in the search for and matching of biological family members in Medellín, Colombia with candidates (hereinafter referred to as: seekers) from the programme Spoorloos.




KRO-NCRV takes these allegations extremely seriously, firstly because this issue is very painful and sad for the seekers concerned. Secondly, the integrity of Mr E.V. (the local assistant) and also Ms E.N. (correspondent with whom Spoorloos has worked for many years), and thus possibly also the integrity of the Spoorloos programme itself, is being called into question.

The alleged abuses were brought to light by Mr C.v.d.S., a journalist and reporter, via a broadcast of 'Kees van der Spek: Oplichters Aangepakt' (Kees van der Spek: Con Artists Tackled), which was broadcast on 11 October 2022 by RTL5. According to the information in this broadcast, there were cases in Colombia involving disinformation or, at the very least, inaccuracies. The searches in question that resulted in 'mismatches' are said to have taken place in the late 1990s and early 2000s. According to the reports, searchers were reunited with people who turned out not to be biological relatives. In addition, after achieving a positive result, if there was still an additional search query, for example, seekers would have independently given additional assignments to Mr E.V. outside of Spoorloos, in the hope of still finding family members. According to the signals, the searchers paid money for this, while the results of these assignments were seriously questioned by the searchers, as was the expenditure of the money they had transferred to Mr E.V.


The aim of the investigation was:

-  To determine whether the contact person in Colombia acted with integrity during searches commissioned by the regular correspondent of 'Spoorloos' and/or during additional searches that took place outside of 'Spoorloos';
-  If this was the case, to determine who was involved.

Prior to and during the investigation, an action plan was agreed upon, consisting of the following activities:

-  Holding a preliminary meeting;
-  Holding informative discussions with five representative searchers for family members in Colombia;
-  Conducting one or more interviews with:
 - Mr D.B., reporter for Spoorloos;
 - Mr C.v.d.S., journalist and reporter;
 - Mr P.V., former editor-in-chief of Spoorloos;

- Mr S.M., former editorial staff member of Spoorloos;
- Ms M.M., incorrectly linked mother of a searcher;
- Ms E.N., correspondent for Spoorloos in Colombia;
- Mr E.V., local assistant to E.N.;

 Delivery of a final report.

The investigation took place between November 2022 and June 2023 in both the Netherlands and Colombia.

During the investigation, Ms D.J., the editor-in-chief of the Editorial Team, acted as the contact person for our employees.

2. Summary

The information in this summary is based on the interviews conducted and the information obtained from them, as well as on data from the information available from KRO-NCRV. The results of the investigation are discussed in the sections below.

2.1 Determining whether the contact person in Colombia acted with integrity during searches commissioned by the regular correspondent of ‘Sporloos’ and/or during additional searches that took place outside of ‘Sporloos’.

This investigation focused primarily on searches in which something went wrong. The positive matches in Colombia, some of which also involved Mr E.V., were not investigated further. The searches mainly took place in the late 1990s and early 2000s in the vicinity of Medellín, Colombia's second largest city. It should be noted that in the late 1990s and early 2000s, Medellín was confronted with an intense and violent geopolitical situation, dominated by a power vacuum that had arisen after the death of Pablo Escobar. Various drug cartels, paramilitary groups and the government fought for power. Drug-related violence, together with corruption and violence, had a negative impact on the economy and the well-being of the inhabitants, contributing to social inequality, insecurity and poverty. This made the searches in the area more difficult.

2.1.1 (Non-)integrity

From the interviews conducted by our researchers and the information obtained, no evidence was found to suggest that the parties involved in the searches deliberately linked the wrong family members. Based on the interviews with those involved, it can be concluded that little was checked and verified. It should be noted that the investigation focused primarily on mismatches and cases where something went wrong, and that the statements of family members found at the time were complicated. The memories and statements of those involved may have been influenced by fear, shame or anger. The searches also took place some 20 years ago, which means that the truthfulness of the statements cannot be immediately verified. Moreover, there were limited opportunities at the time to verify matters, either on site or from the Netherlands.

DNA testing for consumers was just emerging in the late 1990s and early 2000s and was less accessible, more cumbersome and more expensive than it is today. At the time, these tests were not yet carried out as standard by the Editorial Team, as has been the case since 2019. Obtaining DNA via blood samples was often perceived as uncomfortable by those being tested, and it was not until the 2000s that other techniques were introduced. Because DNA testing was less

common, investigations were often based on information in documents and interviews.

In the run-up to the investigation, the Editorial Team retrieved 19 old Spoorloos cases from its archives in which Mr E.V. was involved. The Editorial Team then decided to carry out DNA testing, as far as possible. After DNA samples were taken in the Netherlands and Colombia, one additional mismatch was identified in January 2023, in addition to the three mismatches previously identified.

In general, it can be said that all parties involved in the searches, including Mr E.V., Ms E.N. and the Editorial Team, placed too much trust in each other's knowledge and experience. The trust in Ms E.N. was partly based on the fact that Ms E.N. was regarded by the Editorial Board as a professional in the field of adoption, as she had been involved in adoptions from Colombia to the Netherlands in the past and had subsequently carried out searches for the biological families of adoptees for the Wereldkinderen foundation.

2.1.2 Ms E.N.

Ms E.N. was employed by the editors of Spoorloos for many years as a correspondent in Colombia. She was paid for her hours worked and could claim expenses. She was the point of contact for searches on the ground. The trust placed in her was based on the fact that she was regarded as a professional in the world of adoption. Ms E.N. was an intermediary for many years for the Wereldkinderen Foundation, a foundation that championed the rights and welfare of vulnerable children in developing countries. Ms E.N. was involved in the establishment of the CRAN children's home and, on behalf of Wereldkinderen, maintained contact with the ICBF (Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar, the Colombian Child Protection Agency) and directors of children's homes. She offered assistance in the search for biological parents and also accompanied adoptive parents in Colombia. For searches for Spoorloos in dangerous areas or areas that were difficult for Ms E.N. to access herself, she enlisted the help of a local assistant, in this case Mr E.V.

In conversation with our investigators, Ms E.N. indicated that she saw herself as an interpreter/translator and coordinator of searches in Colombia and that she also carried out searches herself, albeit rarely or never in the vicinity of Medellín due to the danger involved. She relied on information from Mr E.V. and translated his findings for the editorial team in the Netherlands.

The investigation revealed that Ms E.N. was paid on the basis of her hours worked and her expenses were reimbursed by Spoorloos/KRO-NCRV. She charged Mr E.V.'s costs for his work to Spoorloos and these are also listed on her expense claims. The expense claims were not always clearly specified. Invoicing was also often based on good faith.

2.1.3 Mr E.V.

Mr E.V. conducted searches in the Medellín area on behalf of Ms E.N. Discussions revealed that Mr E.V. was working as an assistant at a law firm at the time of the searches. Ms E.N. knew him through her work for the World Children's Foundation. Mr

E.V. himself had many contacts abroad and, in his role at the firm, he had access to adoption papers and registers. He received a standard fee of 100 dollars (USD) per search, regardless of the outcome, and could claim additional costs for travel and accommodation from Ms E.N. Ms E.N.'s invoices also include Mr E.V.'s costs.

When searching for a family member, Mr E.V. was usually given a name, a region and/or a place name by Ms E.N. with the instruction 'Find the person with this name who has given up a child'. Mr E.V. stated that he would search on the basis of the name he received from Ms E.N.

E.N. When someone confirmed, after asking a few control questions, that they had given up a child, Mr E.V. assumed that this was correct. He then passed this on to Ms E.N., assuming that she would verify it. Mr E.V. stated that he was not really in a position to determine whether someone was actually the biological mother he was looking for, because he only received limited information and the situations in which he was searching were often very complex given the situation in the area. However, Mr E.V. did ask the person he found a few verification questions, as far as possible. Mr E.V. also stated that he sometimes asked Ms

E.N. Our investigators also saw these questions in written correspondence between the two.

Mr E.V. stated that he received a standard fee of 100 dollars (USD) (or 200,000 pesos) from Ms E.N. for his searches and was also able to claim his actual expenses from her. Ms E.N. also stated that Mr E.V. received the equivalent of 100 dollars (USD) for his searches and that he could claim his actual expenses, such as travel and accommodation costs, from her.

When asked about financial compensation outside of Spoorloos, Mr E.V. stated that he only received money for expenses he incurred. According to his own statement, he only charged Ms B.Q.K. and Mr K.v.d.M. for costs because he had carried out work at their request (outside of Spoorloos) or incurred expenses during his search.

Further investigation has not provided any evidence that Mr E.V. enriched himself improperly through his searches.

2.1.4 Summary of other conversations

From the conversations with various parties involved (Mr E.V., Ms E.N., former candidates and former employees of the Editorial Team), it appears that the work was mainly based on mutual trust in each other's knowledge and experience. The Editorial Team of Spoorloos relied on the

The information provided by Ms E.N. could not be verified from the Netherlands, other than by comparing the findings of the search with the information available to the searchers.

It should be noted that it was not unusual for the stories of mothers who had been found to differ from those of the adoptees, as the mothers who had been found were sometimes in circumstances where they could not or did not dare to be honest. If a story did not match, this was not necessarily a reason for the editors to doubt its veracity.

The editors of Spoorloos started the searches based on the information and documents provided by the searchers, and also informed them that they would be searching based on that information. No in-depth investigation was therefore conducted into the accuracy of the information and/or documents provided by the searchers.

Mr C.v.d.S. did not provide any factual evidence to prove that Mr E.V. had acted with malicious intent or committed fraud, as stated in his programme. The private detective hired for the programme 'Kees van der Spek: Oplichters aangepakt' (Kees van der Spek: Con Artists Tackled) did not share his findings with our investigators. According to Mr C.v.d.S., it was his own journalistic conclusion that Mr E.V. was a con artist. In his own words, he stated:

'If you publish a story a few times about a mother who has been found but who suddenly cannot be reached again, then that is deliberate.

No concrete evidence has been found to prove that Mr E.V. acted dishonestly. The allegations of fraud as expressed in the programme 'Kees van der Spek: Oplichters aangepakt' (Kees van der Spek: Tackling Fraudsters) appear to be based on journalistic interpretations, whereby no factual evidence to substantiate the allegations has been presented in the context of this investigation.

