

# I got money for nothing and a flat for free, says minister's mistress

**Spain**  
Isambard Wilkinson Madrid

The mistress of a Spanish minister has said she never did a stroke of work for the two government jobs he gave her and was lodged by him in a luxury flat for three years.

A dentistry student named as Jessica R, who reportedly works as a prostitute, made the revelations to a court investigating corruption allegations about her former lover, José Luis Abalos, who was the transport minister and right-hand man of Pedro Sánchez, the Socialist

prime minister. In her statement to the supreme court in Madrid she said that she was given jobs in two public companies, Ineco and Tragsatec, which are linked to the transport ministry, after sending her CV to Abalos in a WhatsApp message.

She said she had offered to work at one of the jobs but was never called. "At Ineco, I went to pick up a laptop that I needed for the job. I was [an] administrative assistant. I asked if they ever needed anything, but never heard anything from them."

For that job she was paid €1,000 a

month. How much she earned from the other post was not disclosed.

The woman described how she came to live in a luxury flat in central Madrid with a rent of €2,700 a per month over three years, saying that it was convenient for Abalos because it was near the Socialist party headquarters and near her university. According to corruption investigators the payment for the flat was part of a sum paid by businessmen to the minister for the deals he facilitated for them.

She also said she accompanied Abalos on numerous official visits. "We

went on trips every month," she said. "I can't give you a number, I don't know if I did 15 or 20, I'd be lying if I told you. I remember many: London, Moscow, Abu Dhabi."

Spanish media claim Abalos met the woman after choosing her from an online directory of sex workers. The court confiscated Abalos's passport this month while it investigates the allegations against him, which have embarrassed Sánchez.

Abalos, who was transport minister between 2018 and 2021, is accused of being part of a corruption ring involv-

ing contracts for the purchase of masks and sanitary equipment in the Covid pandemic. He has denied wrongdoing.

The scandal is highly sensitive for Sánchez, who has been accused by the right-wing opposition of having covered it up. Abalos was expelled from the Socialist party last year when the scandal broke. He is still an independent MP.

Sánchez's wife, Begoña Gómez, and his brother, David, face an inquiry into alleged corruption and influence peddling, which the prime minister has called an effort to undermine him. Both have denied wrongdoing.

# Moving with the chimes: Gen Z is keen on bellringing

**Italy**  
James Imam Limbiate

Racing to football practice, eating ice cream on echoing piazzas, arguing with siblings over the television remote: these are some of the things that Italian teenagers do after school on a Friday.

Another is ringing bells. In the tower of a parish church in Limbiate, a village just outside Milan, a group of young bellringers aged from 13 to 22 tug on ropes as a leader calls out their numbers. A smartphone placed at one ringer's feet records the spectacle for thousands of online followers.

As other ancient skills such as glassblowing and stone masonry face an uncertain future across the continent, a craze for campanology has caught on in Lombardy with new bellringing recruits determined to keep the tradition alive and share it online.

"When I was two years old, I heard the bells in my town and fell in love with the sound," said Nicolò Manzo, 13, the group's youngest member, during the gathering at St George's Church. "My parents racked up a big petrol bill driving me around to hear bells in various towns."

Manzo is the youngest member of the Federation of Ambrosian Bellringers, a group dedicated to preserving northern Italy's distinctive manual bellringing tradition. More than of half its 53 members are under 30, and the number of under-18s has more than

doubled since its founding. "We were amazed to find so many young enthusiasts. It made us believe the tradition could have a future," said Corrado Codazza, 59, who was one of the founders of the association and an enthusiast of the Ambrosian bellringing tradition of Lombardy and Piedmont.

When the association was founded in 2009 practitioners of the Ambrosian system were scarce. But last year, Unesco added Italy and Spain's bellringing traditions to its Intangible Cultural Heritage list. Italy is believed to have about 8,000 bellringers.

The tradition of bellringing in Italy is at least 14 centuries old. In a text from the year 622, the nobleman Ludovico Moscardo described how bells in Verona tolled to announce the death of a bishop.

Bell towers became important symbols of power, with 283 recorded in Milan in 1798. Some in the country remain instantly recognisable landmarks. The 325ft bell tower of St Mark's Basilica in Venice, once a watchtower and beacon for passing ships, is still the city's tallest structure.

As cities built towers, distinct local bellringing styles emerged. Ringers at Bologna's vast San Petronio Basilica helped establish the Bolognese ringing tradition, which uses lighter bells. These traditions suffered setbacks during the Second World War, when the fascist government requisitioned bells to be melted down for arms. The spread of automated bell-ringing systems in the mid-20th century further eroded manual traditions.

As well as its distinctive melodies, Ambrosian bellringing, which dates from the 18th century, is defined by heavily counterbalanced bells and the optional use of a carillon keyboard in the bell chamber, where a single player strikes keys with their fists to produce melodies.

Although the popular tunes and the social media presence help, many young recruits had their interests piqued in more traditional ways.

"A very nice priest let me play the church bells for the village feast when I was eight or nine," says Gabriele Mezzanica, 15. "It was amazing as I'd always dreamt of playing them."



Corrado Codazza with the group of seven bellringers, all aged under 23



Some at the "hugathon" to celebrate Jin from the band BTS's end of military service got a little too close for his comfort

## K-pop kiss earns fan a date with police

**W**hen one of the world's most adored male pop stars offered to hug a thousand of his female fans, there was always a chance that some would get overexcited (Richard Lloyd Parry writes).

But the ladies who turned out last summer to meet Kim Seok-jin, of the South Korean pop band BTS, could never have predicted where it would end up — in criminal allegations of sexual harassment.

South Korean police have called in for questioning a Japanese woman in her 50s who was present at the event. Her alleged crime is that while hugging her idol she gave him a peck on the cheek, in violation of the rules of the hugathon.

Kim, 32, known by his

performing name Jin, held the event in June to mark his discharge from the South Korean armed forces after completing 18 months of mandatory national service. That afternoon, he celebrated his first full day as a civilian by opening his arms to 1,000 of BTS's many millions of fans in a "free hug" event held in a stadium in Seoul.

Video of the event shows a long queue of fans filing up to their hero for the most fleeting of embraces. A small number can be seen pressing their faces against Kim, who grimaces visibly. "Don't attack [me] please," he says at one point through a megaphone.

He did not give any signs of being traumatised by the

experience, however. "I insisted on holding the 'free hug' event. I really wanted to go ahead with it because I wanted to give warm hugs to fans who waited the long year and a half," he said afterwards.

The wanted Japanese lady later posted on a blog an account of her moment. "My lips touched his neck," she wrote, according to the Yonhap news agency. "His skin was so soft."

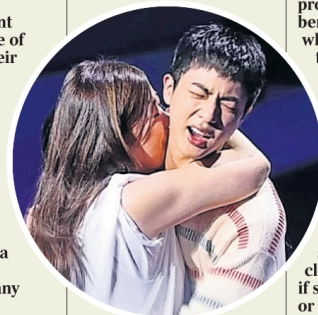
This provoked fury on

social media among members of the self-styled "Adorable Representative MC for Youth" or ARMY, as BTS fans call themselves. The band's management has not commented on the investigation and the complaint was not made by Jin himself but on a government website, which invites members of the public to register petitions for criminal investigations.

Despite the roots of their music in American hip hop and rap, BTS project an image of benevolent

wholesomeness, rather than raunchy sexuality. According to South Korean media, local police have co-operated with their counterparts in Japan.

The suspect, who has not been identified, has not yet obeyed the summons, and it is not clear what will happen if she does not appear — or even what country she is in.



BIG HIT ENTERTAINMENT/AMA2020/GETTY IMAGES