

US charges Bulgarian woman with conspiracy, money laundering in eBay scheme

by Bend_Weekly_News_Sources

Fraud against US citizens involved funds wired to fake escrow accounts to purchase nonexistent merchandise on eBay, losses reached over \$350,000

WASHINGTON — A Bulgarian member of a transnational criminal group has been arrested on U.S. charges by law enforcement authorities in Budapest, Hungary, in connection with an elaborate Internet scheme responsible for defrauding American citizens of over \$350,000 — primarily on eBay, Assistant Attorney General Alice S. Fisher of the Criminal Division and FBI Assistant Director Chip Burrus of the Criminal Investigative Division announced Monday.

On March 1, a federal grand jury in the District of Columbia returned an indictment charging Mariyana Feliksova Lozanova, a.k.a. —Gentiane La France,— a.k.a. —Naomi Elizabeth DeBont,— with conspiracy to commit wire fraud and conspiracy to commit money laundering. The indictment was unsealed upon the defendant's arrest in Budapest on March 22, and Lozanova has since waived extradition to the United States.

According to the indictment, from March to April 2006, Lozanova and others allegedly participated in a scheme to advertise merchandise for sale on the eBay Web site, including expensive motor vehicles and boats. When the U.S. victims expressed interest in the merchandise, they were contacted directly by an email from a purported seller. The victims were then instructed to wire transfer payments through —eBay Secure Traders,— an entity which has no actual affiliation to eBay but was used as a ruse to persuade the victims that they were sending money into a secure escrow account pending delivery and inspection of their purchases. Instead, the victims' funds were allegedly wired directly into one of several bank accounts in Hungary or Slovakia controlled by Lozanova and her co-conspirators.

Lozanova allegedly opened the accounts using a fraudulent Canadian passport and a U.K. passport, which falsely identified her as —Gentiane LaFrance,— and —Elizabeth Naomi DeBont,— respectively. The cars and boats the victims intended to purchase were never delivered. Likewise, the victims' money was never returned. Lozanova allegedly withdrew the proceeds shortly after the funds had been wired into her account and distributed them to other members of the criminal group in Budapest.

—This arrest is an excellent example of the strong cooperation between the FBI and Hungarian National Bureau of Investigation (HNBI) to stem Eurasian organized crime,— said FBI Assistant Director Chip Burrus, Criminal Investigative Division. —Since April 2000, the FBI- HNBI Organized Crime Task Force has worked closely to investigate transnational enterprises headquartered in this historic Central European center of commerce and finance.—

If convicted, Lozanova faces a maximum sentence of 20 years in prison for the wire fraud conspiracy and 10 years in prison for the money laundering conspiracy. In addition, Lozanova could be required to pay fines totaling over \$500,000, as well as forfeitures and restitution to the victims of the scheme.

The investigation is being conducted by the FBI â€“ Hungarian National Bureau of Investigation (HNBI) Organized Crime Task Force located in Budapest, Hungary (Budapest Task Force). The Budapest Task Force was established by the FBI in April 2000 in an effort to address the increasing threat of Eurasian organized crime groups to the United States. Its objective was to develop cooperation with law enforcement in Central/Eastern Europe, and to identify transnational cases with a nexus to the United States. Presently, four FBI agents are assigned to the Budapest Project, along with six HNBI detectives. In addition to the Hungarian authorities, law enforcement officials from Slovakia and Bulgaria have also cooperated in the investigation. The investigation is continuing.

The case is being prosecuted by Acting Deputy Chief Thomas Ott and trial attorney Melissa Paoella of the Criminal Divisionâ€™s Organized Crime and Racketeering Section. The details contained in an indictment are allegations. The defendant is presumed to be innocent unless and until proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt in a court of law.

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