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News Release

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Romanian national returned to U.S. to face charges

A 22-year-old fugitive from Romania who was charged last year on counts of aggravated identity theft and other charges made his first appearance yesterday in federal court after being extradited to the United States from Spain.

The Spanish government granted the extradition of Sergiu Daniel Popa to the U.S. on approximately May 14, 2008, nearly seven months after the U.S. State Department filed a request with Spain. Popa was provisionally arrested Sept. 25, 2007, in Spain on behalf of the U.S.

Popa was indicted June 19, 2007, on three counts of possession of 15 or more unauthorized access devices (i.e. credit card numbers) and three counts of aggravated identity theft by the U.S. Attorney's Office for the District of Minnesota. The indictment outlines an Internet "phishing" scheme perpetrated by Popa to collect personal information of individuals and sell it.

Popa's indictment alleges that from June 2000 to February 2007, he resided in New York and Michigan, and maintained two e-mail accounts. The Romanian national's accounts allegedly contained personal identification and financial information, such as names, addresses, bank account numbers, credit card numbers, Social Security account numbers and personal identification numbers of thousands of individuals, including some Minnesota residents.

The indictment alleges that from May 2004 to February 2007 Popa had in his e-mail accounts numerous phishing Web sites that were pre-built and ready to deploy, and that contained computer programming code that was set up to collect credit card numbers and personal identification information under the auspices of legitimate financial institutions.

Phishing refers to a scheme in which fraudulent e-mails and/or fraudulent Web sites are created to appear as if they are authorized by legitimate entities, such as financial institutions. Recipients of phishing e-mails and/or Web sites are tricked into providing their personal identification and financial information because they believe that a legitimate institution has requested the information.

The indictment alleges that on several occasions, including February 2004, November 2004 and January 2005, Popa offered by e-mail to sell stolen personal identification information. In October 2004, Popa allegedly e-mailed files containing phishing Web sites and e-mails, including logos and graphics of legitimate companies, which also contained computer source code that could be used to conduct phishing schemes.

In August 2005, Popa allegedly offered to sell a phishing toolkit that contained step-by-step instructions for setting up a phishing scheme, and in December 2004, Popa allegedly offered to sell hardware devices capable of copying the magnetic information from the backs of credit cards. Such magnetic information contains personal identification and financial information of the credit card holder.

The indictment alleges that on Feb. 27, 2007, Popa possessed a machine for imprinting graphics on blank white cards, foil ribbons for making the holographics that appear on identification cards and credit cards, as well as blank plastic cards and partially created false drivers' license and credit cards.

According to a Federal Bureau of Investigation affidavit, the agency began investigating Popa in January 2005. The FBI executed a number of search warrants directed to Internet Service Providers hosting e-mail accounts, and agents found Popa's two accounts.

The affidavit cites an e-mail dated Jan. 16, 2005, sent from one of Popa's e-mail accounts, that contained a file, which had credit card information for about 5,889 victims, 96 of which were from Minnesota, including 34 from Hennepin County.

If convicted, Popa faces a potential maximum penalty of ten years on each of the credit card number possession counts and a mandatory statutory minimum penalty of two years on the identity theft counts. All sentences are determined by a federal district court judge.

This case is the result of an investigation by the FBI, and is being prosecuted by Assistant U.S. Attorney Nicole A. Engisch.

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An indictment is a determination by a grand jury that there is probable cause to believe that offenses have been committed by the defendant. The defendant, of course, is presumed innocent until he or she pleads guilty or is proven guilty at trial.