

# Greek police see leads in money laundering suspect's phone

July 27 2017, by Costas Kantouris

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A Russian man is escorted by police officers as he arrives at a courthouse at the northern Greek city of Thessaloniki, Wednesday, July 26, 2017. Greek authorities say they have arrested a Russian man wanted in the United States on suspicion of masterminding a money laundering operation involving at least \$4 billion through bitcoin transactions. (AP Photo/Giannis Papanikos)

A cellphone seized during the arrest of a Russian man the U.S. wants extradited for allegedly laundering vast sums through bitcoin transactions

should provide key data for the investigation, Greek police said Thursday.

The U.S. Department of Justice has identified the suspect as Alexander Vinnik, 37. It said he allegedly laundered more than \$4 billion through BTC-e, one of the world's largest digital currency exchanges—which he allegedly operated.

The suspect was arrested Tuesday while on holiday with his family in the Halkidiki area of northern Greece, which is popular with Russian tourists, and a prosecutor ordered his detention pending the extradition process.

Police said they seized electronic equipment, including mobile phones, two laptops and five tablets, from his hotel room.

The suspect denies wrongdoing, and said he will fight extradition to the U.S.

Thessaloniki security police chief Avraam Aivazidis told The Associated Press that officers who arrested the suspect at a hotel near Ouranopolis—next to the all-male monastic community of Mount Athos—grabbed his cellphone before he could lock it, ensuring vital data were not lost.

"He did not have time to shut it down," Aivazidis said Thursday. "That was the important thing for us."

A police official said one officer distracted the suspect's attention during the arrest while another snatched the cellphone out of his hand. The official spoke only on condition of anonymity as he was not authorized to discuss details of the case with the press.

A Department of Justice statement said Vinnik has been indicted by a grand jury in the Northern District of California, on charges including money laundering, conspiracy to commit money laundering and engaging in unlawful monetary transactions. The charges, if proved in court, carry maximum sentences of up to 20 years in prison.

The statement said Vinnik allegedly facilitated drug trafficking, helped launder criminal proceeds from syndicates around the world and stole identities. It said BTC-e allegedly developed a customer base heavily reliant on criminals, and was noted for its role in several ransomware and other cyber-crime activities.

According to the indictment, Vinnik allegedly received funds from a major hacking attack on the Mt. Gox digital currency exchange, in which hundreds of thousands of bitcoins were stolen.

Under Greek law, Vinnik can be held for up to two months until the request is examined.

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