

Romanian Citizens Arrested and Charged with Laundering \$1.4 Million in Proceeds from Jewelry Thefts and Covid Fraud

Wednesday, March 15, 2023

For Immediate Release

U.S. Attorney's Office, Southern District of California

NEWS RELEASE SUMMARY – March 14, 2023

SAN DIEGO – Eduard Ghiocel and Floarea Ghiocel, married Romanian nationals and suspected leaders of a Romania-based transnational organized crime group, are charged in federal court with laundering \$1.4 million in proceeds from dozens of small thefts, robberies and swindles targeting mostly elderly victims in San Diego County.

Also charged are four of the Ghiocels' family members or close associates, including Gabriel Ghiocel, Marius Ghiocel, Larisa Ghiocel and Argentina Alexandru. All defendants are alleged associates of the larger Valcea Romanian Transnational Crime Group.

Eduard and Floarea Ghiocel were transferred from state to federal custody and are scheduled to make their first appearance in federal court today. The other defendants remain at large in Romania.

Starting at 9 p.m. PST Monday night (6 a.m. Tuesday - Eastern European Time Zone), pursuant to seven Romanian search warrants issued by the Bucharest Tribunal and executed by police officers from the Romanian National Police's Directorate for Combatting Organized Crime, Service for Combatting Organized Criminal Groups, and Service for Combatting Organized Crime Valcea, assisted by FBI and IRS, officers seized Ghiocel assets across locations in Valcea County, Romania, including high-end luxury vehicles, gold coins, and cash, totaling \$618,075.

According to a complaint and an international seizure warrant, the defendants conducted a series of 17 jewelry thefts in elderly communities in San Diego between March 2020 and September 2022. The complaint said the Ghiocels also filed false unemployment claims in order to steal about \$32,250 in California unemployment insurance benefits intended to help workers impacted by the pandemic.

According to the complaint, the Ghiocels laundered the proceeds of their crimes by pawning expensive gold jewelry and watches for cash in jewelry stores in Los Angeles. The Ghiocels, who never had any legitimate employment, then systematically laundered that cash, along with the stolen unemployment insurance proceeds by sending wire

transfers to Romania via Money Service Businesses, and by purchasing gold bars, gold coins, and high-end luxury vehicles from locations in Southern California and shipping these items to Romania. In total the Ghiocel Sub-Group repatriated \$1,367,652.02 in assets from illicit funds to Romania, the complaint said.

“We have alleged that an organized crime group targeted and robbed members of San Diego’s senior community, many of whom lost items of great personal significance,” said U.S. Attorney Randy Grossman. “We will pursue justice for these crime victims wherever the evidence takes us, even as far as Romania.” Grossman thanked the prosecution team, investigating agencies and authorities in Romania for their excellent work on this case.

“The FBI would like to thank our local, state, federal, and Romanian partners for their incredible cooperation in this important matter,” said Special Agent in Charge Stacey Moy of the FBI’s San Diego Field Office. “The FBI and our partners are committed to scouring the globe to find those who have victimized our citizens, to hold them accountable for their crimes and to seize what they have stolen. A special thanks to the Romanian authorities who were essential, as the trail of this investigation led within their borders: prosecutors from the Directorate for Investigating Organized Crime and Terrorism and police officers from the Romanian National Police’s Directorate for Combating Organized Crime. Their assistance is an excellent example of what international cooperation can bring to bear.”

“This international organized crime ring targeted some of the most vulnerable of our population. It’s important that we send a message to criminals that the safety of everyone in our community matters,” said San Diego Police Chief David Nisleit. “I want to thank the investigators and prosecutors who continue to work toward justice on behalf of the victims.”

“According to allegations in the complaint, the defendants victimized some of our most vulnerable citizens and targeted relief programs during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic,” said Tyler Hatcher, Special Agent in Charge of IRS Criminal Investigation’s Los Angeles Field Office. “One of our main duties as financial investigators is to take the profit out of crime and hold criminals accountable for their actions, and that’s what this investigation is about. IRS-CI will continue to work closely with our partners locally and internationally to locate and hold criminal organizations accountable for their crimes.”

Assistance was provided by the Romanian National Police (Service for Combatting Organized Criminal Groups and Service for Combatting Organized Crime Valcea) and the Romanian Directorate for Investigating Organized Crime and Terrorism (Agency for Prosecuting Organized Crime). The Justice Department's Office of International Affairs also provided significant assistance.

*The charges and allegations contained in an indictment or complaint are merely accusations, and the defendants are considered innocent unless and until proven guilty.

DEFENDANTS

Case Number: 23MJ0474-MSB

Eduard Ghiocel (1) aka Eduard Alexandru, aka "Filica"	Age: 47	Transient, Romanian
Floarea Ghiocel (2) aka Floarea Alexandru	Age: 48	Transient, Romanian
Gabriel Ghiocel (3)	Age: 25	Transient, Romanian
Marius Ghiocel (4)	Age: 33	Transient, Romanian
Larisa Ghiocel (5)	Age: 24	Transient, Romanian
Argentina Alexandru (6)	Age: 31	Transient, Romanian

SUMMARY OF CHARGES

Title 18 U.S.C. § 1956(h) and Title 18 U.S.C. § 1956(a)(2)(A) — Conspiracy to Transport Funds to Promote Unlawful Activity

Maximum penalty: Twenty years in prison and \$500,000 fine or twice the value of the monetary instrument or funds involved in the transportation, transmission, or transfer, whichever is greater

INVESTIGATING AGENCIES

Federal Bureau of Investigation

San Diego Police Department

Internal Revenue Service

California Employment Development Department Investigative Division

U.S. Department of Homeland Security

Department of Labor Office of Investigator General

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