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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Russian Accused of Giant Cyber Heist Pleads Not Guilty in U.S. Court

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A Russian hacker accused of a major cyber crime has pleaded not guilty.

A Russian accused of helping mastermind the largest international data breach ever prosecuted in the U.S. has pleaded not guilty, following his extradition from the Netherlands, the U.S. Department of Justice said.

Vladimir Drinkman, 34, was accused of conspiring with at least four other men to install "sniffers" to comb through computer networks of financial companies, payment processors and retailers around the world, and then to store and eventually sell data they collected.

These attacks led to the theft of more than 160 million credit card numbers, and hundreds of millions of dollars from companies and customers, in a scheme dating from 2005, the Justice Department said.

Sixteen companies' networks were infiltrated, including those of Nasdaq OMX Group Inc, 7-Eleven, France's Carrefour SA, JC Penney Co, JetBlue Airways Corp, a Visa Inc licensee, and Heartland Payment Systems Inc, authorities said.

Drinkman, of Moscow and Syktyvkar, Russia, was charged with 11 counts of wire fraud, unauthorized access to computers and conspiracy.

He entered his not guilty plea before U.S. Magistrate Judge James Clark in Newark, New Jersey on Tuesday. A trial is scheduled for April 27. Drinkman was detained after his plea, and faces up to 30 years in prison on the most serious counts.

Florian Miedel, a lawyer for Drinkman, did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

The defendant had been fighting extradition since his June 28, 2012 arrest in the Netherlands.

"Drinkman's extradition on the indictment this office brought more than a year and a half ago shows how relentlessly we will pursue those who are charged with these serious crimes," said U.S. Attorney Paul Fishman in New Jersey.

Another Russian man implicated in the scheme, Dmitry Smilianets, 31, was extradited to the U.S. from the Netherlands in September 2012 and remains in custody.

The other defendants — Alexandr Kalinin, 28, of St. Petersburg, Russia; Roman Kotov, 33, of Moscow; and Mikhail Rytikov, 27, of Odessa, Ukraine — remain at large.

Drinkman and Kalinin had previously been charged as "Hacker 1" and "Hacker 2" in a 2009 indictment accusing Albert Gonzalez of Miami over his involvement in five corporate data breaches, including at Heartland.

U.S. prosecutors publicly released their names in July 2013, in what law enforcement authorities at the time said amounted to criticism of uncooperative Russian authorities.

Gonzalez is now serving a 20-year federal prison term.

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