

## Interpol's Most Wanted: Bulgarian Bernie Madoff Tries To Buy His Freedom

(NAPSA)—Tzvetan Vassilev's scheme was as simple as it was daring: buy a bank and, over the course of several years, systematically drain its assets through a complex and opaque network of shell companies into private businesses he controlled.

The story of Vassilev's rise and fall began in 1995, when he was named head of Foreign Currency Transactions and Liquidity for the Central Cooperative Bank; a position he held until the spring of 2000. During his tenure at the bank, Vassilev set up a private financial company, Fina S- AD, and gradually transferred approximately 30 loyal and hand-picked subordinates from the bank to Fina S-. Once the personnel were in place, Vassilev made his move.

In May of 2000, Vassilev resigned from the Central Cooperative Bank and, shortly thereafter, acquired the Corporate Commercial Bank AD, which at the time had only \$5.5 million in assets. Once the purchase was complete, Vassilev appointed himself the Executive Director of the Management Board and later, Chairman of the Bank's Supervisory Board. As Chairman of both the Management Board and the Supervisory Board, Vassilev not only directed every transaction at the bank, but he approved them as well. Contemporaneous with taking over the Bank, Vassilev and his associates structured a shady web of onshore and offshore companies that would eventually funnel the Bank's assets into a network of legitimate businesses owned exclusively by Vassilev.

Once in place, Vassilev's shell companies were granted exclusive access to the Bank and all its investment activities. Through this unholy union, Vassilev began systematically bloodletting the Bank's assets through the network of shell companies and directly into his new businesses.

By running the loans through shell companies, Vassilev capitalized his personal business enterprises free from the watchful eye of regulators.

For years, Vassilev milked the Bank to support his personal businesses and his increasingly posh lifestyle. In addition to capitalizing his personal businesses,

The image is a screenshot of an Interpol website page showing a wanted poster for Tzvetan Radoev Vassilev. The page header includes the Interpol logo and the text 'YEARS OF INTERNATIONAL POLICE COOPERATION'. Below the header is a navigation bar with links for HOME, ABOUT INTERPOL, NEWS AND MEDIA, MEMBER COUNTRIES, INTERPOL EXPERTISE, and CRIME AREAS. The main content area features a portrait of Tzvetan Radoev Vassilev on the left and his identity particulars on the right. The identity particulars include: Present family name: VASSILEV, Forename: TZVETAN RADOEV, Sex: Male, Date of birth: 12/08/1959 (55 years old), Place of birth: GABROVO, Bulgaria, Language spoken: Bulgarian, and Nationality: Bulgaria. Below the identity particulars, there is a section for CHARGES, which states: 'Misappropriation in public office in particularly large size, representing a particularly serious case'. The page also includes a 'Back to Search result' link and a 'MISSING PERSONS' button in the top right corner.

Vassilev syphoned millions of dollars directly into his increasingly padded pockets in the form of loan agreements made between the Bank and the various shell companies under his control.

The scheme was successful in part due to the complicity of Vassilev's staff and of several employees of KPMG Bulgaria OOD, who helped cook the books so the Bank's activities appeared above-board. But, as was the case with Bernie Madoff, as Vassilev's scheme grew bigger, it became increasingly difficult to cover, eventually catching the attention of regulators.

The scandal over the Corporate Commercial Bank AD erupted in June 2014. Within a week, more than 20 percent of the deposits were withdrawn by customers from the Bank and on June 20 of that year, the Bulgarian National Bank placed the Corporate Commercial Bank AD under special supervision. For Vassilev, the game was up. Unlike the authentic Bernie Madoff, who turned himself in, Vassilev fled; first to Austria and then to Serbia, where he remains, free from extradition by Bulgarian authorities.

When the dust settled, Vassilev and his co-defendants were charged with embezzling 2.56 billion Levs, the equivalent of \$1.51 billion USD. In addition, Vassilev and three former Bank employees were indicted for stealing 207 million Levs in cash, the equivalent of \$126.6 million USD. But the damage

didn't end there: Vassilev's wife, Antoaneta Vassileva, was also charged following her audacious purchase of a palatial €20m estate on Lake Geneva. Even Vassilev's daughter Radosveta was caught up in the scandal, formally charged with money laundering in June. All three family members are wanted by the international policing organization, INTERPOL.

From his self-imposed exile in Belgrade, Mr. Vassilev is now plotting his comeback in the form of an international campaign to convince American lawmakers to invoke the Global Magnitsky Act against the Chief Prosecutor of Bulgaria and the very officials who uncovered Vassilev's fraud. Using what's left of his dwindling war chest, Vassilev hired a Washington, D.C.-based lobbyist and Bill Richardson, the former governor of New Mexico who famously paid hush money to keep a woman from revealing their affair while he was in office. Given the undeniable facts of his case, dovetailed with his refusal to defend himself in Bulgaria, Vassilev faces the impossible task of convincing the U.S. Congress to turn against both the Bulgarian and the international justice system by which he stands accused. In the meantime, the disgraced former governor of New Mexico and Vassilev's other lobbyists seem happy to take all the cash they can get from Vassilev's fallen empire.