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14 indicted in Calif. on charges of arranging sham marriages for Russian, Ukrainian immigrants

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SACRAMENTO, Calif. — A federal grand jury in Sacramento has indicted 14 people on charges of arranging sham marriages to immigrants from Russia, Ukraine and Eastern European nations to help them stay in the United States, U.S. Attorney Benjamin Wagner said Tuesday.

The indictment was unsealed after the man charged with being the ringleader, Sergey Potepalov, 55, was arrested Monday at his home in the Sacramento suburb of Citrus Heights.

He and the others had “made a business out of marriage fraud” since 2002, arranging at least nine marriages to circumvent immigration laws, Wagner said. They attempted at least 39 marriages, although not all were included in the indictment, said Dan Lane, assistant special agent in charge of the Department of Homeland Security investigations office in Sacramento.

“We’re not talking about downtrodden people that are looking for a way to get to a better life. We’re talking about people making a profit,” Lane said at a news conference. “It exploits our generous immigration system that’s designed to help people with humanitarian reasons to come here, compassionate reasons.”

Foreign nationals paid up to \$10,000 to Potepalov and an associate, Keith O’Neil, 44, of Sacramento, to arrange for the marriages. U.S. citizens who agreed to the marriages were paid up to \$5,000.

O’Neil and Potepalov began doing business after they met at a bar in Sacramento, said Assistant U.S. Attorney Daniel McConkie, who is prosecuting the case. O’Neil married twice as part of the conspiracy, according to court documents: to a woman from Russia in 2002 and to a woman from Romania in 2007. In between, he tried to arrange four other fiance visas during three trips with Potepalov to Moscow. All four petitions were denied.

McConkie said two couples married each other in Reno, Nev., in 2007 as part of the conspiracy: Marla Brennan, 30, and her boyfriend, Richard Vargas, 36, both of Sacramento, wed Dumitru Sisianu, 25, and Alina Turcan, 26, who immigrated from Moldova and now live in Jacksonville, Fla.

The grand jury issued the indictments July 14, but the charges were not announced until Tuesday to give federal authorities time to arrest the key figures. Eleven of the 14 are in custody, while the others are being sought.

The defendants include eight U.S. citizens and six foreign nationals in California, Florida and Massachusetts. The 14 are charged with conspiring to commit marriage fraud, make false statements and induce a foreign national to remain in the U.S. The conspiracy charges carry maximum sentences of up to 10 years in federal prison.

U.S. Magistrate Judge Gregory Hollows entered not guilty pleas on behalf of Potepalov and four other defendants who had their first court appearances Tuesday in federal court in Sacramento. A hearing for a sixth defendant was delayed for a day until court officials can find a Russian interpreter.

Potepalov, dressed in an orange jail uniform, spoke only briefly to answer Hollows' questions but gestured to family members in the courtroom, pantomiming that they should telephone him. They left without talking to reporters.

Assistant Federal Defender Douglas Beevers, who temporarily represented Potepalov, Brennan and another defendant, said the case was unusual for the size of the alleged conspiracy. He said some of the defendants may not have realized they were committing federal crimes.

"The people who were paid to get married or who got married, they're only looking at a few months' time (in prison, if convicted)," Beevers said. "It's not serious."

Attorneys for the remaining two defendants declined comment.

Veranika Koushal, 32, of West Palm Beach, Fla., had her initial appearance Tuesday in Florida federal court, prosecutors said. The other defendant from outside California is Aleksandr Krivokhizhin, 38, of Southampton, Mass. Koushal, of Belarus, and Krivokhizhin, of Ukraine, are charged with entering into sham marriages with U.S. citizens

Prosecutors said participants would marry in Sacramento, Reno or Eastern Europe, then take wedding photos, set up apartments to give the appearance of legitimacy, and rehearse their stories for immigration officials.

"They're saying that they love each other, but they haven't necessarily been together for longer than their wedding day," McConkie said.

The investigation began in 2006 after the U.S. State Department alerted homeland security officials that Potepalov was filing fraudulent visa petitions on behalf of Russian and Ukrainian nationals. Potepalov ran an immigration consulting business called United International Inc.

None of the foreign nationals faces immediate deportation, authorities said. Some of their applications for residency or citizenship were denied, while immigration authorities would have to prove that others were in the U.S. under false pretenses.